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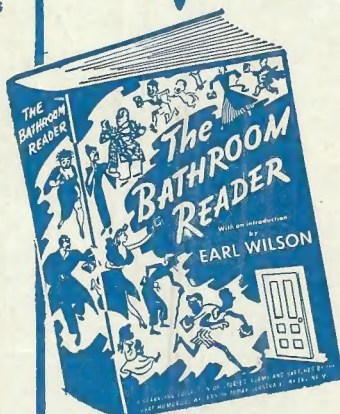
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THE BATHROOM READER

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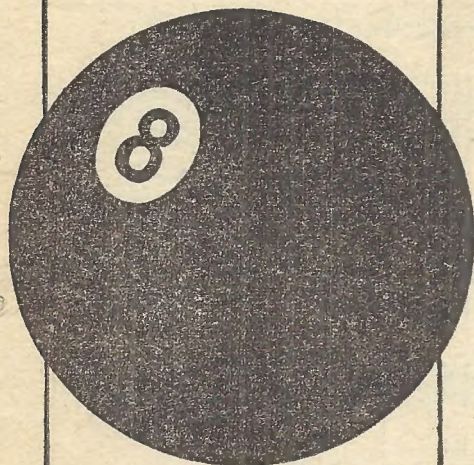
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Volume 10

August, 1948

Number 6

BRAND NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL



THE MAN FROM TEXAS

By AL CODY 6

Too many hombres who never should have heard of Jess Owen knew him, and all with murderous intentions. Then Jess learned of his brother's death and of the deadly trail-drive he had inherited . . .

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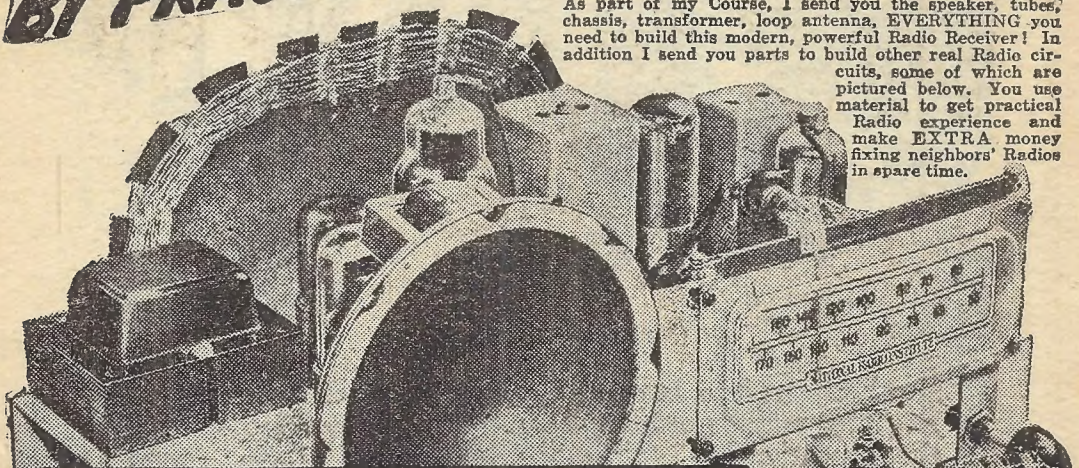
ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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THE MAN FROM TEXAS

By
Al Cody

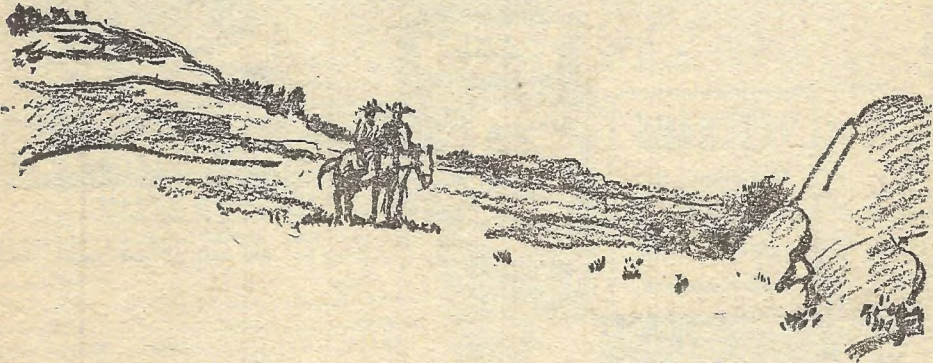
(Author of "Disaster Trail")

Hank Owen had been shot under circumstances which might or might not have been arranged in advance. But the situation that his brother, Jess, found himself faced with didn't give him much time to look into Hank's death. For Jess Owen found that he had inherited the most dangerous trail-drive he had ever known . . .

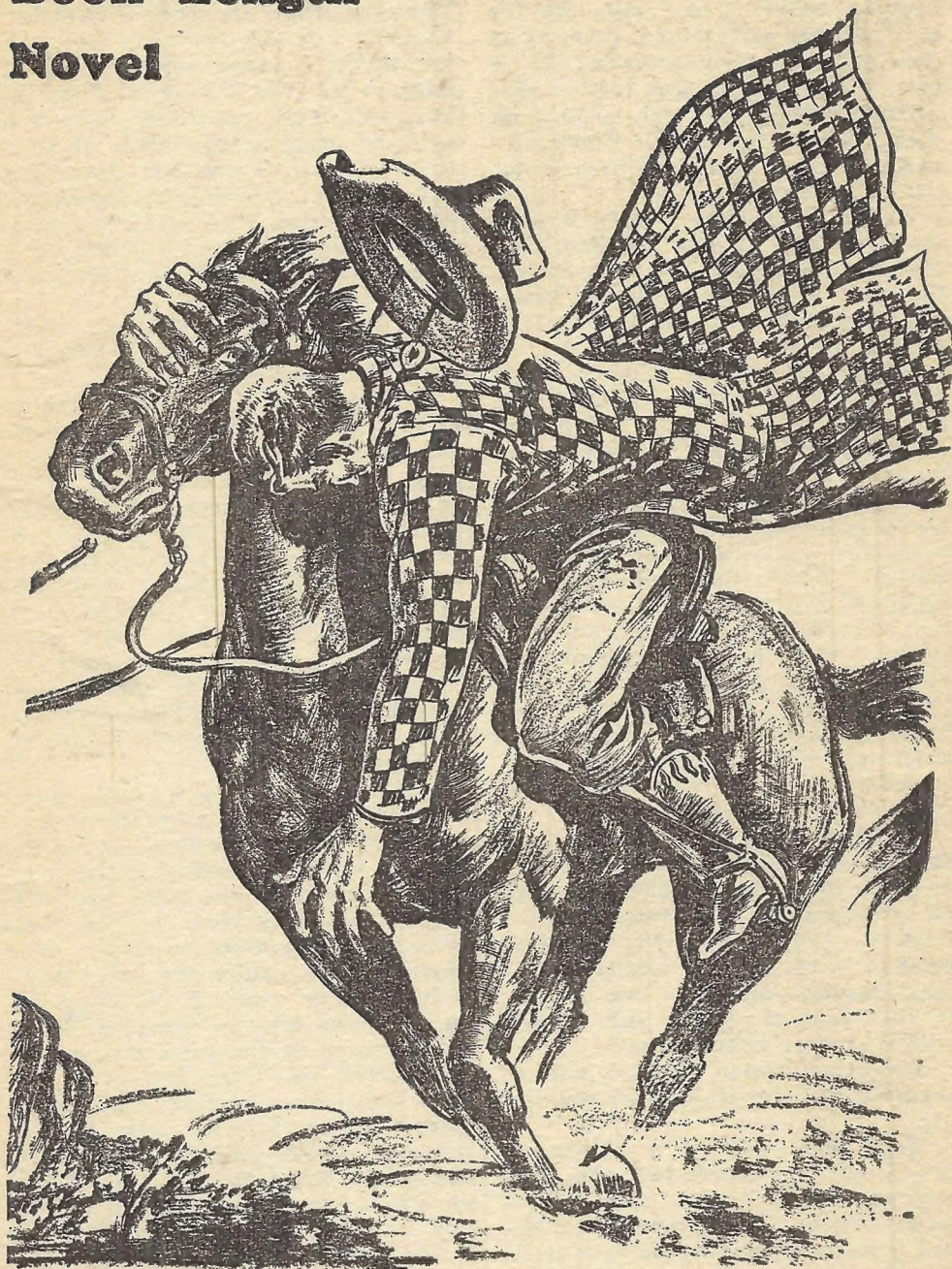


Murder By Mistake

"STAND and deliver!" Here, Owen thought wryly, *is the element of surprise, at its best—or its worst!* One moment the trail had been empty, with only occasional scraggly trees or brush to mask its barrenness. The



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They saw the man in Jess Owen's coat fall . . .

next, this man, teetering a little on high worn heels, masked beneath a wide black hat with a red bandana hanging below it, and slits cut for eyeholes, had stepped out, squarely in their path. If he had somewhat the effect of a genie, it was mostly dispelled by the gun which he held on them, one of these new Colt's six-shooters, Owen was quick to note, not the old fashioned pistol.

The Major's pinto, hardly beyond colthood and always skittish, had reared a little, and the Major had the look of a surprised and overplump cherubim in the saddle. Owen's big bay snorted once.

A gun was a hard thing to argue with. Owen raised his one hand, the other still upon the reins, wondering what this portended. The gunman gestured.

"Light down, gentlemen—and hands well away from the hardware, now! For your own good health, of course! When this gun barks, it bites! And I'll take your weapons—for safety's sake!" He did so, then stepped back as they dismounted. His voice was jovial as he surveyed them, his eyes quick and bright behind the mask, seeming to take particular note of the long coat which Owen wore, with its fancy white-and-black checked design.

"It distresses me to do this, gentlemen—distresses me no end! But were not the hosts of Israel commanded to despoil the Philistines? And I hold a grudge ag'in you Saints—what a word for the rabble!—so I must despoil you. I've taken a fancy to that coat of your's, suh. So off with it—before Pluto barks!"

Shrugging, Owen slipped out of the coat. But the Major's ire was rising.

"Sure now, and is it Saints ye called us?" he demanded, and lowered one raised hand to give a ferocious twist to his long mustache. "Bedad then, 't is the mistake ye're makin'. Anyway ye look at it, we're scarcely sainted characters, I'm afraid. While as for being followers of Brigham Young, sure and our only excuse for approaching the City av the Saints, as they call it, is that

it lies athwart our path on the way to Californy!"

"A pity, gentlemen—a great pity!" The eyes behind the mask did not bat. "An error of judgment on my part, for which I crave your pardon! I mistook you for Mormons. I should have said that, as a Saint who has suffered much at the hands of Gentile evildoers, I was but despoiling you in turn according to command! A poor excuse, but better than none. Now I can only plead that my need is greater than your own—and the bark of Pluto!"

He bowed again, mockingly, holding Owen's coat, their pistols and the Major's flat purse.

"I intend to ride a little way—after which, at yonder point where the trail turns left, I will leave your guns. That is a matter of precaution, gentlemen, and I hope that you will take it as proof of my good intentions. You may have need of weapons in the sainted city ahead. And, because a trade is no robbery, or so they say, I shall leave you my coat in place of your own, sir! As a garment, it is, perhaps, a trifle shabby, and even a thought threadbare—also less showy. But such as it is, I bestow it as freely as I take!"

Bowing mockingly a third time, he tossed the coat in question at Owen's feet, turned and strode off a little way to where, behind a clump of brush, they saw now that his own saddled horse grazed on the thin grass. He mounted expertly, still keeping them under his gun. With a last jaunty wave of his hand, he turned down the trail ahead of them, attired now in the somewhat gaudy coat which Jess Owen had worn.

"A gentleman bandit!" the Major swore, giving a fresh twist to the mustache so ferociously at odds with the round bland face of him. "With an excuse to fit the occasion! Sure and I've seen them all, now!"

"At least, he left us our horses," Owen shrugged, and picked up the discarded coat, then put it on. Across his own muscular shoulders the fit was a little snug, but it served. "It could be worse."

"Oh, sure, that I'll admit," the Ma-

for conceded. "And the coat fits ye well enough, since you're both big men, you with that stand and deliver look, and him with a stand and deliver gun! Saints and Gentiles! Saints preserve us—and there's a nice choice of words for ye!"

AND AN empty pocket with a devil's trail ahead! Owen thought. They rode in silence, coming presently to the turn of the trail, where, as promised, their pistols had been tossed. Now they could see the bandit, about half a mile ahead, still riding, a distinct and arresting figure in the black and white coat. Apparently he had removed the masking bandana.

"'T was in St. Louis ye bought that coat, I mind," the Major sighed. "They told you there was not another the like av it west of the river, and I belave it! Men across a thousand miles, seein' it, would take the wearer for ye, Jess."

Farther ahead, an easy slope of hill lifted to a crest; even as they looked, something made sharp echoing thunder in the hills, along with its own peculiar brand of lightning. The sound of a heavy buffalo gun.

At the hillcrest, whence the gun had boomed, two horsemen appeared now—sitting their horses calmly, motionless, waiting.

Watching. For, even as the bellow of the buffalo gun reached their ears, the jaunty figure on the horse ahead had thrown up its arms, seemed to twist in the saddle, to spill. For a moment the outlaw hung there, grotesquely poised, then slipped in a sprawling huddle to the ground, while the terrified cayuse ran on, sidling because of the dragging rein.

The sprawled figure showing no sign of moving, and the two on the knoll swung their horses short about and disappeared over the crest again, heading in the direction of the City of the Saints.

Jess Owen and the Major had waited in unmoving silence as well, aware that here, by the trees and bordering brush, they would be out of sight. Only after the pair had vanished did they ride ahead again, the Major ex-

pressing pent-up breath in a long whoosh.

"Wurra!" he gasped. "And there's retribution for ye, Jess—the way av the evildoer! And never did I see it quicker!"

"There's cold-blooded murder!" Owen growled. "I wish I'd had a rifle, now!"

The Major gave him a shrewdly appraising glance. "Maybe ye have something there, Jess," he conceded. "As ye say, 't was murder—with no motive of robbery, since they ride away and leave him lie undisturbed! It runs in me mind that, unwittingly av course, the poor fellow may have done ye a good turn, Jess!"

"You mean—?"

"Sure and he was wearin' your coat—and despite his own ignorance on the subject, the coat av Jess Owen is pretty well known in a good bit av the West besides Texas—and as the only one av its kind west of the river, the same as that clerk in St. Louie promised ye! At that distance, all they could be sure of was the coat!"

"But why?" Owen demanded. "I've never been this way before—only west or south of here. How could I have any enemies here? How would anyone even know that I was coming this way? I didn't know it until a few days ago, myself."

"Wurra, wurra, man, now ye, propound a mystery," the Major sighed. "And not a pleasant one!" He pulled up now, horse dancing skittishly, near where the unmoving figure of the highwayman still lay sprawled, his face, uncovered now, upturned to the blue sky above, wide-open eyes looking on vacancy.

Owen dismounted. He stared down for a moment, distastefully, then proceeded to remove the coat, which fortunately had not suffered even a bloodstain. As he cast aside the old garment which he had been given in exchange, the Major protested.

"Sure, now, Jess, and is that wise?" he demanded. "Such lightnin' has a way av strikin' twice in the same place! And after this kindly intervention o' lady luck—wurra, 't is fair flyin' in the face o' Providence!"

"It's my coat, and I wear it," Owen said stubbornly, putting it on. He drew out the Major's wallet and handed it back, then examined with interest the six-shooter nestling in the other capacious pocket. Returning it, he unbuckled the cartridge-belt which the dead man wore and strapped it about his own middle.

"Alas, poor Yorick!" he said simply. "Maybe this gun—with this coat—will help to pay back for what you got, one day! We'll see!"

There were rocks not far off, and they made a cairn against the wolves and buzzards. The Major's mustaches drooped despondently. He was uncommonly silent for a while as they rode.

"I don't like it, Jess," he said finally. "I don't like it at all. Sure and it may be the City av the Saints ahead, but hereabouts I catch the breath av brimstone! I wish we'd taken another trail to the land av gold!"

"I'm worried about Hank," Owen said simply.

"Hank? 'T is a thought, that. If there's trouble to be found, that fool av a brother av your's would be ears over tea-kettle in it, trust him for that!"

THEY RODE in silence again, each busy with his own thoughts, two trail-hardened men, Owen's blond hair showing sun-bleached around the edges of his hat, the Major's, reddish with a hint of gray in it, still flaming where the sun caught it right. On to where the trail joined a well-worn road, which in its turn presently disclosed a view that grew as the distance, more impressive, curiously pleasant as they neared it. Until finally they pulled up, lounging in the saddles for a better look.

And well they might. It was a pretty sight to see, and one not otherwise met with across a thousand miles of country. The wide, well laid out streets, the neat, orderly buildings, some few of logs, but mostly of adobe, the small streams which had been turned and now sparkled in orderly procession in place of gutters,

The Major gave a fresh twist to his mustache and smiled.

"There she is," he said. "The City av the Saints—or so they call themselves, and I'm not the man to quarrel with others on such matters. Though open to proof, you understand."

The frost was plainer in the Major's long hair as he shoved back his hat, but the ever-glowing sparkle of anticipation for what life might hold was in his blue eyes. Jess Owen's jaw was longer and sharper, his eyes were unimpressed, calculating.

"It don't look like the kind of place that Hank would care for—or get in trouble," he said.

"No," the Major conceded. "Though again, Jess, ye never can tell with Hank. He's like a flea—uncertain and at times irritating. And—whist, speak av the devil! Here, if I mistake not, will be news! Sure an 't is your cousin, Jess—not that I've iver heard ye brag of the relationship, as he loikes to do!"

Owen's brows twitched together. A single horseman, from far up the street, had turned, sighted them, and stared for a long surprised moment. Then he had put his horse at a canter toward them.

"Now what would he be doing in this country?" Owen muttered.

GREER Curran was a handsomer man than Jess Owen, slighter, more graceful, and well aware of it. He lifted a hand in greeting now, and whereas that of Owen and the Major were brown and bare, his was encased in a fringed gauntlet of white buckskin. To match the fancy vest he wore, or the Indian beadwork on chaps.

"Hello, Jess," he greeted, and tossed a careless word to the Major, like a bone to a dog. "And you, Major. And I suppose I can guess what brings you to Salt Lake."

It was all as casual as though not more than a year and a thousand miles were between their last meeting, and there was no cordiality on either side.

"You've word of Hank, then?" Ow-

en demanded, and bothered with no other greeting.

"You've come here, looking for him?"

"What would you suppose?"

Curran shrugged. "So I would suppose," he agreed. "I'm sorry, Jess; I arrived here only yesterday myself, on my way to California. I figured I'd have a try at digging for gold, too. I had no thought, of course, that Hank might have been here—until I chance to get word of him."

"You might come to the point," Owen suggested.

"That's the trouble with you, Jess. You're too direct—too blunt. I try to skirt the borders of trouble, to ride up on a thing like a hunter on a grizzly, against the wind. But if you'll have it, it's bad. It seems that among a lot of other things, Hank got into a game of poker. Which is bad form, and apt to be dangerous, when you're in strange territory—particularly a Gentile in the Mormon stronghold. They were just carryin' him out the doors when I rode by, purely by chance, and recognized him. Not havin' guessed that he was within a thousand miles of here, you can imagine my shock."

"You mean—?"

"There were four of them in the game, it seems. They buried him and one of the others in a common grave, only this morning, I've just got back from there."

Jess Owen's face had not changed during this stark recital, save to tighten a little. But the Major tugged at his mustache in horror. "What's this?" he demanded. "You're tellin' us that Hank's killed? That's terrible."

"Of course it is," Curran agreed. "But that's the way of it. And you wanted it direct."

Owen looked at the sun, past its zenith now. His tone was flat. "You came yesterday," he repeated. "And just at the end of it?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I hadn't aimed to linger—not here. But he was my cousin—and I had no notion as to whether you might be along; so I stayed to look after things—and into matters."

"And what have you found?"

"For one thing, Hank seems to have administered his own justice as he died. For another, he was out of his class, and a fool as usual. He accused them of cheating."

That sounded like Hank, there was no doubt of that. Yet somewhere here, as the Major had said, there was the odor of evil things. It added up to a devious pattern not at all to Owen's liking.

"You've learned nothing more?" he asked.

Curran shrugged. "What is there to learn?" he asked. "Or do, for the matter of that—now that he's buried. I was going to pick up my turkey and head on west, when I chanced to see you ride in."

"You're in a hurry, then?"

"Not too big a one. But when I start somewhere, I always like to get there."

"Ye'd tarry to show us where they've buried him, now?" the Major suggested.

Curran's glance was hot with old animosity. The Major had caned him, long years before, when Greer was a boy. The fact that he had had it coming had never made him forgive nor forget, and they all of them knew it.

"Of course," he agreed. "Damn it, men, don't you think this has hit me hard? Hank was my cousin. And to see him, in that shape—"

"Sure and it would be a shock," the Major agreed. "I can't believe it yet."

"This way," Curran said abruptly, and swung his horse. "It's quite a way out of town, back among a little grove of trees. Not a bad-looking place."

NOTHING further was said between them as he led the way. Each man was busy with his own thoughts.

For Owen, and he knew that the Major shared them with him, they were not pleasant. Hank Owen had been a wild one, always. Not steady like Jess, but visionary, impulsive. But likeable, and his own brother. Owen's mind went back in brief

retrospect. Both had been on the frontier all their days. Their primary interest had always been in cattle, and it was well said that no man knew cattle better than the Owens. Jess had served as foreman of a big Texas ranch, remaining more settled than the fiddle-footed Hank. Yet he had traveled over a lot of this Western country in his day, up to St. Louis, then to Santa Fe and on to Monterey, seeing much of California when it was all Mexican territory.

It was ironical to him now that he'd spent a month on the big ranch of John Sutter, in the Sacramento country, where gold had just been found of late. Sutter too, had failed to guess it, of course. It was the stampede for gold which had quickened again the always lively blood of Hank. He had sent word that he was heading for California, suggesting that Jess come along.

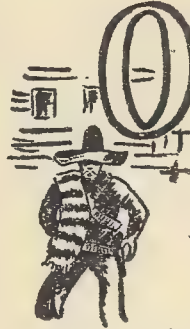
There had been little appeal in the notion, for Jess Owen. He had a good job which was to his liking, and it was good to be in Texas again. But Hank would need some looking after, so he had started—and the Major had come along as a matter of course. The Major generally went where Jess Owen did; across the years, it had become a habit. Yet for all their promptness, it seemed that already they were too late.

Here was a grove of trees, and, back in their shady depths, a fresh mound rawly raised. They came upon the little natural clearing abruptly, with the sun splashing down through the leaves like a benediction.

And it did not escape the ever-watchful eyes of Owen that Greer Curran started and tried, too late, to jerk his horse around and into a side-path, as if to lead them away from the place. Then, seeing that it was too late, the sudden scowl on his face smoothed out, and he was lifting his hat in a sweeping bow, while still in the saddle—a bow toward the lady who stood, gray-clad and somber, looking down at the new-made grave. Holding a small bouquet of new-picked desert flowers in her hands.

2

Heritage Of Trouble



OWEN'S first impression of her was that she was an older woman; his second, that she must be a Mormon. Both of those were swiftly revised as she turned to survey them beneath steady brows.

She wore no hat, and her crown of midnight-black hair was very soft and fine. She was tall, for a woman, her eyes gray and steady, and she was slender as a boy. And young, Owen saw now—. Yet she was a woman—completely and utterly a woman, and beautiful.

It was not so much in the lines of face or figure, though they did their part well. It was more than that, a beauty which went beyond conventional things, a gift which only one individual in a thousand possesses. To her it seemed to belong by natural right.

"Miss Shea," Curran explained. "This is an unexpected pleasure, to find you here!"

"Pleasure?" she repeated, and her eyes rested on him for a moment as he swung down from the saddle, coldly, dispassionately. "I find it no pleasure—but a duty, perhaps a privilege, to come here—to say good-by." She stopped and laid the flowers, very gently, on the new turned ground. But her gaze had gone beyond Curran, questioningly, to Owen and the Major, who were also dismounting.

Curran flushed a little at the rebuke. "That wasn't the way I meant it," he said. "You know that, Cynthia. Er—permit me to introduce Miss Cynthia Shea, Jess Owen—Hank's brother. And Major McCord."

The Major bowed from the waist. He had a supple bow, despite his thickness about the middle. "T is a

pleasure, Miss Shea. The better for being unexpected."

Jess Owen removed his flat hat. His nod was brief. "Your servant, ma'am," he said.

Her eyes were upon him, grave, measuring. "You are Hank's brother?" she said. And for a moment there was the suggestion of tears in the back of her eyes. "This then, must have come as a great shock to you. I am sorry."

"I just now learned of it, ma'am," Owen admitted. "You were a friend of his?"

"Perhaps you could call it that," she agreed gravely. "I had known him only about a week—but I liked him. I felt that I had to come here—once, to see where he lay."

Owen bowed his head, understanding that.

"I'll be happy to escort you wherever you're going, Miss Cynthia, if I may have that pleasure," Curran interposed now. And it seemed to Owen that there was an eagerness here quite out of place to the occasion, or to the liking for the company of a pretty girl. An eagerness to get her away without delay.

Evidently she sensed the same, and resented it. She turned her back squarely upon him, and addressed herself to Owen. "I will go, of course," she agreed. "You will want to be—alone here, a little while. And I have finished. But will you come to see me, later in the day? I think that we should talk—there are matters to be discussed. You will come?"

"I'll be glad to," Owen agreed, not understanding. But a man could say no less, under such circumstances. *There was something between her and Hank*, he thought.

"Thank you," she agreed, and, as Curran started to move forward, added: "I'll be all right, thank you. And they will want to talk to you. If you will bring them—later in the day, please."

Thus checked, Curran could only bow and agree. "A pleasure, Miss Cynthia, I assure you."

She inclined her head, very slightly, nodded again to Owen and the Major, and moved away, through the

trees to where a carriage and team waited, seeming somehow strange and out of place here. There was a flush on Curran's face; it was apparent to Owen that this had not happened at all to Curran's liking or planning.

THE CARRIAGE wheels receded, yellow spokes flashing warm in the sun, the soft padding sound of horses' hoofs, on grass their accompaniment, the straight sedate back of Cynthia Shea, her hands steady on the reins. Then they were gone. Owen swung to Curran.

"What's this all about?" he demanded.

Greer Curran hesitated. "I was meaning to tell you, all in good time," he said smoothly. "Hank was tangled up, as usual, in a hair-brained scheme. Concerning this woman and two thousand head of cattle."

"Women, and cattle," the Major murmured. "The two great loves of his life."

"In this case, I can hardly blame him," Curran sighed. "You've seen her. I've seen the cattle. It was a lucky chance—or so Hank figured—his finding them hereabouts. Now it seemed that she wants to talk with you. So I suppose you'll want it that way, too."

"She asked me to come," Owen reminded him.

"Ah, yes. I was afraid you'd feel that way. The infernal sense of duty which actuates you, Jess. In this case, though I was in a hurry to get to California, I'd almost be willing to take this responsibility off your shoulders."

"What responsibility? What are you talking about?" Owen demanded irritably.

"Hank's, to be sure. He found this lady—Miss Cynthia Shea, and as you'll have observed, a rare combination she is, with beauty, brains and possessions. It seems that Hank fell for her—as was not surprising—and, not knowing him, she also fell for him, more or less. You'll see what I mean by responsibility presently. But as I mentioned, if you don't like it, I'd not find it too great a sacrifice to take it off your hands."

"Hank was a fool where women were concerned, but no menace to them," Owen growled. "Which is more than I can say for you, Greer."

He did not like this cousin of his, and had never been at much pains to conceal the fact. But Curran refused to take offence. "You're upset, Jess," he said. "I don't blame you... Shall we go back to town and get a bite to eat? Salt Lake's the only place along the road for a thousand miles where a man can believe he's civilized again."

There was nothing to do here. That was the finality of such a situation. Owen stared down at the handful of flowers, and it seemed fitting that they should be here, placed by the hand of Cynthia Shea. They turned and followed, Owen silent, Curran garrulous as usual. So he turned now to the Major.

"You're a long way off your usual range, up here."

The Major assented with a pull at his mustache. "Hank sent word that he was headin' for California by way of Salt Lake. Jess, of course, figured that he should kape an eye on Hank. As my meself, I was more than half intrigued be the thought av rivers of gold."

"Not to mention Mormon women?"

The Major shook his head vigorously. "No sir. Saints they call themselves, but as to the revelation they may have received, sure and I would not hold with it. One wife at a time is enough for any man."

"You sound a bit soured," Curran observed. "and here's the city. They hold all of us to be Gentiles and more or less as enemies, but they like our money, and treat us fairly enough to get it."

He led the way to a house which, built of thick 'dobe, was cool and pleasant inside. And here, as he had promised, they were served with well-cooked food, including fresh eggs and vegetables—the first that either of them had come upon in a long while.

THEY WERE in a somewhat more favorable frame of mind when they rode out of town again, heading south and a little east, to a destina-

tion some miles from the city. And here to a green oasis, or so it seemed after the desolation of much of the land which they had ridden through of late.

"Here we are," Curran said. "Two thousand head of cattle—and Cynthia Shea."

He waved an arm to encompass a big herd, now leisurely grazing, watched by half a dozen riders. Closer at hand was a wagon, prairie schooner type, the chuck wagon beside it. The canvas flap was pushed back as they neared, and Cynthia Shea stood framed there for a moment.

This time she wore a man's flat hat and levis, which seemed only to accentuate her boyish slenderness. Despite himself, Owen watched her with grudging admiration as she stepped to the ground, lightly, surely.

Curran was dismounting again, once more bowing with an exaggerated flourish. A gesture, Owen noted, which seemed lost on her.

She extended her hand to them, a quick, firm grip like a man's. Her eyes were questioning. "Mr. Curran has told you the situation?" she asked.

Owen shook his head.

"He's told us nothing," he said shortly.

Cynthia did not seem surprised. "It's soon told," she said. "I became acquainted with your brother a few days ago. I—I had just gotten this far in this wagon, on my way to Oregon. That was before news of the gold in California had reached us—when we started west, I mean. And—having gotten this far, I was not certain of what I wanted to do."

"She was orphaned on the way," Curran explained, and this time his voice was full of sympathy.

Cynthia Shea nodded, her face unchanging. As if she feared that she must cry, if she permitted herself any leeway.

"I had some money—and no purpose. Hank had an idea for making two fortunes, at one and the same time. He said he was heading for California, to dig gold. But that from all reports, people were swarming in there from land and sea until food

to feed them would be at a premium. If he had the money, he said, he'd buy up a couple thousand head of cattle here and drive them along to California, and double his money when he got there—the first fortune."

Her eyes were level, steady, but there was a question in her tones now.

"Hank learned that I had money—and he persuaded me to buy this herd. He had just found out about it. Two thousand head. His part of the agreement was to get to California. For a half of the profits. He made the deal and paid the cash—and died that night in a brawl."

The Major was plucking at his mustache, troubled. "'T is like Hank," he said. "A new notion a day, and the wilder the better. And always involvin' some one else."

"But this one has merit to it," Curran suggested. "There will be a market for beef in California, just as he said—at almost any price a man wants to charge. There's no guess-work to that."

"No," Owen conceded darily, a little appalled at the thing. "But there's a lot of hell in between."

"Maybe it was a wild scheme," Cynthia admitted. "But the way he told it, I believed it—and so did he, Hank said it could be done. The point, now, is that he bought the cattle, and I paid for them. If you would be willing to take them through on the same terms, I would be obliged to you."

"I offered to do it for her," Curran murmured. "But now she seems to think it should be you, Jess."

Cynthia did not look at Curran. Yet it was plain to Owen, in that moment, that she disliked his cousin and distrusted his offer. Which, he had to admit, showed a rare perception, a good judgment not often met with in women. Most of them fell easy victim to Curran's smiles.

IT WAS apparent enough also that Curran had had no intention, if he could help it, of letting him know anything about Cynthia Shea or this herd. He had said at first that every-

thing had been attended to, with the burial of Hank.

Curran was watching him, with a sardonic sort of amusement. "He don't like it, Miss Cynthia," he said. "He's no gambler, like myself. Nor like Hank. He doesn't even appreciate the smile of a beautiful woman."

"Hank persuaded me to do it," Cynthia said. Her voice was serious. "Maybe I was foolish. But all that I have in the world is tied up in this herd now. And he was very sure that it could be done. It seemed like a good idea—since a woman can't very well dig for gold."

She was challenging him now; Owen knew it well enough. Challenging him to take up the responsibility of being Hank's brother, of fulfilling the obligation which Hank had not only assumed but had been responsible for. How much had Hank meant to her?

And, though she did not say so, he knew that, if he refused to help, that she would turn to Curran. Not because she wanted to, but because she would have no choice. Hank's folly had put her in a bad spot; there was no question of that.

"I'm thinking about the job of getting them there," he said bluntly. "It's a devil of a trail. Hank was crazy to think a herd could make it. There are long stretches of desert, of bad water. Or of no water at all. He'd never been over it. I have."

"He was counting on your knowledge of the trail," Cynthia agreed. "Though I can see that perhaps he wasn't being quite fair to you."

The same old thing; let Jess do it!

"I'm not thinking of myself so much. He wasn't being fair to you, either," Owen explained. "To get you to make such an investment. It's only a fifty-fifty chance, at best, that they can be gotten through at all—alive. If they die along the trail, through the desert—" he shrugged.

"I know," Cynthia agreed. "There's risk, I can see that now. But if you do undertake it, I know that you'll do your best. That's all that anyone can ask."

She was beating down his defenses

—she and Hank. And the knowledge that Curran stood by, if he refused.

"Since Hank's dead and the herd's paid for, it's too late to change," he conceded. To sell them again, hereabouts, would be pretty well out of the question. No one would buy, except the Saints. And they would be chary of such a big herd, forced to give a low price, even if that was not the practice in a business deal with Gentiles.

"If you want me to, I'll have a try at takin' them through for you."

Her smile was grave, but somehow warming. "From what I'd heard about you, Mr. Owen, I was sure that I could depend on you. Hank may have been wild—but I think that he idolized you. He was so sure that there was nothing that you couldn't do."

Owen's mood softened a little. Poor Hank, to die so young—just at the start of the trail he had loved so well. He was doing this thing for Hank, too—Hank who, beneath all his surface irresponsibility, had had a heart of gold.

"Hank was crazy," he said gruffly. "I wouldn't try such a job, under any other circumstances. Where shall I send the money—if we get any of them there alive?"

Her answer staggered him a little. Somehow he hadn't thought of that. "Nowhere," she said. "I'll be there to take it. I'm going along with the herd."

3

The Plot



WEN opened his mouth, then closed it again. He should have foreseen this, he knew. But the thought of a woman, along on such a trip, where death would be a saddle-mate, was not pleasant. Particularly such a woman as Cynthia. He did not want her to have to face the bitter hazards of that journey.

Yet what could he do about it? The herd belonged to her, and all that she had was tied up in it, thanks to that hair-brained scheme of Hank's. And because Hank was dead, and he was Hank's brother, it was up to him to see this thing through.

"I have Mammy Green with me," Cynthia was explaining now, gravely. "She was my nurse, and she's always more or less looked after me. And we're used to the road."

That of course, was true enough. One who had come this far on the road to Oregon must be inured to the hardships of travel. To dust, and mud. To sun and cold. To rain and sleet and hail. To the endless slow turning of wheels, or the quick wild rush of stampede. To the everlasting jolting where there was no road. To insects and bad water, to lack of privacy, to being thrown into the unwanted company of all sorts of other travelers—

It was a long list, and a grim one—tempered in its turn by new vistas unfolding beyond the horizon, by wide meadows full of the glory of myriad flowers, by the feel of accomplishment when you stood upon a divide and looked back, and then looked ahead. One who had come this far, as Cynthia had, would be used to the road.

Also, she was newly orphaned, which was a further claim on his sympathy. Owen did not ask for details; he could guess them only too readily. The dread cholera was spreading all along the road, from the Missouri to the Bear. This was a plague year.

Curran was watching, a sort of wintry amusement in his eyes. He turned now toward his horse, then swung back to hold out his hand.

"Well, this seems to finish my responsibility hereabouts," he said. "So I'll keep moving. See you in California, Jess. And the best of luck. You'll be needing it, I'm thinking." He tipped his hat to Cynthia, smiled, and swung into the saddle. With a short nod for the Major, who was twisting his mustache to new ferocious points. "If there's anything I can do—"

"I guess not, thanks," Owen said, making an effort to be polite. "Come morning, we'll be pointing them west."

"I envy you, at that," Curran sighed. "Well—adios!"

THE AFTERNOON shadows were lengthening when Curran sighted the city again, the sun reflecting redly in the little running streams of it. Something of the same red light was in his eyes as well as a horseman angled across to join him. Trane was a tall man, with glossily black whiskers badly in need of trimming, brown-stained with tobacco juice. His knobby hands seemed to sprout from too-short shirt sleeves, and he was knobby all over. Even in his voice, as he hailed Curran.

"Been lookin' for you," he said, and an unpleasant cackle of laughter welled in his throat, bubbling there, never quite erupting. "Reckon you c'n guess why."

Curran's voice was so unexpectedly chill that Trane was taken a little aback. "I'm not much good at guessing, and I don't like guesswork on the part of others, either."

"Eh? Guesswork!" Trane recovered, chuckled a little. "Ain't no guesswork where I'm concerned, Mister. Not any. I don't do things that way."

"Finer'n frog-hair. I got me a side-kick, like you said to do, just to be on the same side. One of these here Mormons. Name of Dawse Throop. Kind of a boss, he is, in one of these outlyin' settlements away from the city, here."

Curran jerked a shoulder impatiently. "Get on with it."

"There ain't much to tell. We rode out, like you said, an' kept watch on the trail up from the south. Sure enough, this feller come along, wearin' that black an' white checked coat. Couldn't miss it—and I didn't!" That unpleasant laughter bubbled deep in his throat again, as Trane patted the stock of the rifle in saddle-sheath. "Lifted him outa the saddle, clean as a whistle. Deader'n a door nail time he hit the ground!"

"I told you there'd likely be two

of them," Curran reminded.

"Yeah, so you did. Wan't, though. Just him alone. He's plenty dead. You c'n ask Dawse, if'n you like. And now—about that hundred you promised for doing the job—"

"I don't pay for bungling!" Curran's voice was etched with acid. "I just came from talking with him—and his partners—not half an hour ago!"

"You—you what—?" Trane's jaw hung slack, so that brown juice seeped at the edge for a moment. "Talkin' with him—but he was wearin' that coat—I got him dead to rights—"

"I figured you would" Curran conceded. "I thought I could trust you for a job like that. So I was pretty shocked to see the pair of them come ridin' into town today—with him wearin' that coat! How do you account for that?"

"Wearin' the—the coat?" Trane's eyes bugged. "You—you sure? Then there must be two o' them—with two coats—"

"There are two of them but there aren't two such coats in the country," Curran snapped. "How it happened, I don't know. Maybe he smelled trouble—he's a devil for that sort of thing—and got somebody else to ride ahead wearin' his coat, somebody who did not suspect what was in the wind. But he's alive, and so is the Major, who always rides with him. Whoever you killed was the wrong man. And it's made a devil of a mess of my plans."

TRANE could only gawk for a moment. But Curran's plans were already fitting into a new shape.

"He's aimin' to start west with the herd in the morning," he growled. "And that's the last thing I want to happen! I'm going to have that herd—and the girl! It's a combination you don't run across but once in a lifetime!"

Trane brightened a little. Here was mystery, but here too was talk that he could understand.

"Mebby we can still help you out some," he suggested. "Me an' Dawse Throop. I didn't do no bunglin' with that first job, did I? He's deep

buried now. And this other feller—how'n hell would I know that somebody else'd be wearin' his coat?"

"Reckon you couldn't," Curran conceded grudgingly. "And you did a good job in that poker game, like you say, startin' that quarrel and shootin' him down—even if he did get the man you was workin' with!"

Trane shrugged. "Sam was playin' in hard luck, and that jigger was faster'n greased lightnin' with a gun," he said. "That's why I like to work it in pairs, a job like that, with somebody like Sam—or Dawse Throop."

"Are you sure this Throop's to be trusted? At such a job?"

"Sure?" The grin which overspread the visible portions of Trane's face was unpleasant. "Mister, this Dawse Throop calls himse'f a Mormon—one of the Saints. Ef'n he's a saint, makes me think mebby I'd make a good Mormon, myse'f. I could stand havin' a bevy of women to look after me, too."

"There's bad eggs get into every sort of thing, even churches and religion," Curran said tightly. "This Throop sounds like one of them. It's nothing to me, understand. I don't hold with religion anyhow. But I've had a look at this Brigham Young, and I have a hunch that men like Throop won't be too popular with him, not very long. Young looks like an honest man—according to his lights. One who won't stand for much foolishness."

Trane shrugged.

"This Dawse Throop," Curran asked suddenly. "What's he look like?"

"Dawse? He's big—kinda dark, no whiskers—"

"But I suppose, being a Mormon, he's pretty well known around here?"

Trane shook his head. "Nope, guess not. He stays pretty well out in the country—aims to steer clear of the town. When we got near it, he sort of shied off. I guess he ain't much known around here—and don't want to be. Got good reasons, likely."

"Then he'd ought to work. I take it that he wouldn't have any more scruples about killing a Mormon than a Gentile—if the pay was the same?"

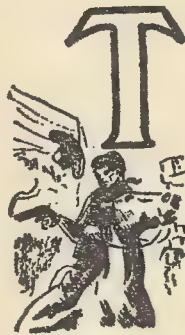
"Hell no," Trane grinned. "That feller 'd kill his grandmaw for a hundred dollars, an' no questions asked."

"That's fine. There'll be twice that in it for the two of you, if you work it right. I'll get hold of that black and white coat—he'll likely be asleep, and I'll manage. Throop can wear it—and it has to be back where it was before morning. Now listen. I don't want any mistakes!"

He explained, and Trane nodded.



Brigham Young Decides



HERE was storm abroad, a wild buffetting of wind and rain. It had come with the early dusk, like an unseemly visitant of the dark, for there had been little prior indication that a storm was on the way. But neither Trane nor the man who rode beside him, clad in a black and white coat, voiced any complaint. The storm fitted in well with their own plans.

They came, presently, to a 'dobe cabin, well beyond the outskirts of the city. There were certain activities which the Prophet frowned upon and forbade to his City of the Saints. But since there were plenty of newly-made Saints who still fell a little short of sainthood in various ways, places such as this one did a good and profitable business, directly in proportion to how far they were removed from the influence of the city.

Now the two, having left their horses outside, entered, to find a lesser company gathered here than usual, on account of the storm. But there were nearly a score in all—men enjoying the forbidden liquor, engaging in games of chance and, in general, conducting themselves very like the Gentiles which they had been until recently.

Trane nudged his companion, who had not bothered to remove his hat. "They Mormons here, Dawse?"

Throop nodded. "Yeah," he agreed. Then drew a slow breath of relief as his gaze roved. "All of 'em, I reckon—but they ain't none here that knows me. It's all right."

He shouldered forward to the bar, accompanied by Trane, ordered a drink, and downed it straight. Then pounded irritably on the bar. "That the best you got to wash a man's gullet with?" he demanded. "You call this stuff whiskey? Mebby that hog-wash is good enough for Saints, that ain't got no guller anyway, but when I ask for whiskey, I want somethin' that'd sear the inside of a hot stove! Eh, Major?"

"Shore, we want red likker, Jess," Trane agreed. "Set out some real stuff for Jess Owen and Major McCord, ef'n you got any tarantler juice," he added. "When we pay for bug juice, we want somethin' that'd make a rattler strike hisself!"

Unfriendly looks were cast at them at these references, for a Mormon, however much he might be backsliding at the moment, still resented such odious comparisons by a Gentile. But a pale, drink, milky and cloudy, composed mostly of alcohol in its raw state and a dilution of water, was set before them—a drink which caused both men to blink as they downed it, and then to grow inordinately quarrelsome. And this last was not merely a part of their act.

Even so, they did not forget the purpose for which they had come. And presently, following up a quarrel, the man in the checked coat, who had been identified for all to know there as Jess Owen, lost control of his temper completely. His hand darted to his side, and came up, clutching one of the new, six-shot guns.

"I don't take nothin' like that from no mangy Mormon," he snarled, and, raising the gun, shot a hole cleanly between the eyes of the astonished man in front of him.

There was confusion, wild anger. But this had been planned and cal-

culated, and there was storm and black night outside, perfect for their ready escape.

EVEN WITHOUT the storm, it was a wild night for the infant City of the Saints. In such a crisis as this, the other men who had flocked to the forbidden 'dobe hut were quick to remember that they were Mormons, and that murder had been done by a Gentile—and were not the hands of these drunken, roistering, Godless Gentiles always against them?

One had only to think back to Nauvoo, to Carthage, to the persecutions even now being organized in the east. It was very convenient to forget that these things had happened before their time of conversion, or even that some few in this same room, now under the shelter of the new faith, had at one time or another had a hand in some of those persecutions. This thing, of open murder, against an unarmed man, cried aloud for justice.

The cry echoed and reechoed throughout the countryside during the night, sounded like tocsin in the city. Despite the storm, men dressed, in the grip of a great and smouldering anger, and gathered in little knots which became groups, and these in turn were forming into something dangerously resembling a mob. It was at that stage when there sounded a pounding upon the door of the Beehive House, set at a little distance from the Lion House, where Brigham Young slept and had his office.

It was Heber Kimball, Young's closest friend and next to him the leader of the Mormons, who had come, along with nearly a dozen other men, all of them excited and angry. Among them was Dawse Throop, now making no secret of his identity.

Brigham Young received them, sleepy, looking a little tired and haggard, appearing like a New England gentleman-farmer, somehow transplanted to this setting, made the leader of a religious movement and a multitude of harassed people. He

calmed the savage undercurrent of talk with a wave of his hand.

"What is it, Heber?" he demanded. "What's the reason for disturbing me at this hour?"

"I felt it best to come to you without delay, Brigham," Kimball explained. "There's evil work afoot to-night, and the people are angry. I'm afraid of mob action in retaliation, and I know that you wouldn't want that."

"There must be nothing of that sort!" Brigham Young answered sharply. "The Lord knows we may have just cause—but there's too much hatred against us as it is, without giving our enemies any further excuse! What has happened?"

Kimball explained, aided by the others as well as possible. The account was exaggerated and somewhat garbled by now, but it was possible to get at the main roots of the thing. Apparently a dozen or so of the brethren had been peaceably gathered together for a quiet social evening in the outlying home of one Jacob Riggs—

"I know his place!" Brigham Young interrupted, and his lip curled scornfully. "Quiet social evening! That place is a sink of iniquity, and must be looked to. I have my doubts as to the nature of the entertainment in such a house. But go on."

"Well, it seems that these two Gentiles arrived," Kimball explained. "They demanded drinks, evidently mistaking it for a saloon—"

"Not without cause," Young interjected grimly. "And I have no doubt they got them?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if they did, Brigham," Kimball agreed. "Anyway, it seems that there was bad feeling, which led to an open quarrel—in which it appears that the visitors were the aggressors. Until all at once, and apparently with little provocation, one of them, who was addressed by his companion as Jess Owen, and who was wearing a most distinctive sort of overcoat, pulled a gun—one of these new six-shooters—and shot Paul Burton be-

tween the eyes. And Burton had no gun, no weapon of any kind! Then they escaped in the storm—both of them being armed, and having the drop on the rest of the group."

BRIGHAM YOUNG took a short turn or so up and down the room and stopped. Gray dawn was beginning to steal in at the windows, the storm was slackening outside, though the eaves still dripped monotonously.

"I have seen this Burton," he sighed. "A harmless enough sort, and rather devout, I thought him. What else, Heber?"

"That's about all," Kimball explained. "Except that the news has spread, and the people are crying for vengeance. I think there would have been mob action before now, save that myself and some of the cooler heads have enjoyed them against any action until you have decided upon the matter."

"You have done well," Brigham Young agreed. "But you sound as if the people knew where to find this murderer?"

"They think they do," Kimball nodded. "The one man, in this white and black checked coat, was addressed as Jess Owen by his companion, whom, in turn, he called Major McCord. Well, it seems that there's a big herd of cattle, a few miles out of town—a herd which has been purchased with the intention of driving it to California. This Jess Owen is trail boss. And if they have returned to camp—"

"There's been a bunch out there, scoutin' it," Dawse Throop interrupted. "They say they're there, all right, with a trail crew. And gettin' ready to pull out at daylight!"

Brigham Young fixed his eyes on Throop for a moment, sensing the eagerness in the man. The same sort of eagerness of a bloodhound about to be unleashed.

"Lucky that the place has been only scouted," he said drily. "It sounds as though there had been extreme pro-

vocation. But we must not forget that public opinion, the country over, is strongly against us, and if there was to be an incident, here and close to the city—it could ruin us!" He eyed them grimly.

"Besides," he added thoughtfully. "I'm not entirely satisfied with the sound of this story. What do you think, Heber?"

"There are discrepancies," Kimball agreed cautiously. "Some of it does not quite make sense."

"That was my idea," Brigham Young nodded. "And it is our policy to be fair, to give impartial justice, even to our enemies—"

"How you going to get a straight story from the Gentiles, or any fair dealin'?" one man demanded indignantly.

Brigham Young's smile was a little tired. "It is not easy, that I'll have to admit," he said. "But they have the same belief concerning us." He looked sharply out at the gathering daylight. "Heber, go out and tell the people to disperse, to go about their accustomed tasks—that there is to be no mob action. I will see that justice is administered!"

Kimball immediately left the room. Brigham Young stopped his pacing.

"This requires looking into," he said. "A careful gathering of the evidence, a sifting of the facts. It runs in my mind that there is more to this than we have heard, considering where it happened. There is likely something to be said on both sides. In any case, justice must be done, to whoever is guilty—impartial justice, fairly administered. I will send a group of men to follow this trail herd, to delve into the matter—"

Dawse Throop stepped forward eagerly. "I'd be mighty glad to volunteer for that job, Mr. Young," he asserted. "That man they killed, Paul Burton, he was a friend of mine. I'd follow 'em clear to Californy, if necessary."

BRIGHAM YOUNG considered him for a moment. He knew something of this new convert, and

liked little of it. On the other hand, a man like Throop could be better spared than the more sober and industrious, particularly if he did not return. Once out in the land of gold, he probably would not.

Too, his temperament was the sort necessary for such a rigorous undertaking as this might well be. Except that, when it came to impartial fact-finding and administering of justice, he was ill-fitted for it. But there might be a solution for that.

"This will not be an easy job," he warned. "You understand that?"

Throop grinned. This was a good night's work, so far, that Trane had put him next to. "I reckon it'll be hard," he agreed. "But like you say, justice's got to be done. I'll do my best, ef'n you say the word."

"It must be justice," Brigham Young warned sternly. "Make no mistake about that. If it should develop that this Owen and Major McCord are innocent, after all, then that is that, except that the guilty must be found, whoever and wherever they are—and punished!"

"I'll see to it," Throop promised.

"And another thing. The trail is lined with Gentiles—who are becoming increasingly numerous as this gold craze sweeps the land. The thing must be done circumspectly—do you understand?"

"Trust me for that, too," Throop promised. "There won't be nothin' come back against the Saints, if that's what you mean."

"It's what I mean, but not all that I mean," Brigham Young adjured him. "I mean what I say when I tell you that I want fair and impartial justice to prevail." He stabbed a long finger at one of the quieter members of the group, who up to now had not said a word.

Eliphalet Elwood," he said. "You are a man of good sense and sober judgment. Would it be too inconvenient for you to go along as co-leader of the party, along with Mr. Throop?"

Elwood, a tall, loose-jointed man with a scraggly mustache and watery

blue eyes, started at mention of his name, then shook his head. "I'll be happy to serve in any way I can, Mr. Young," he said simply.

"That is a proper spirit," Brigham Young agreed, and eyed with some satisfaction the somewhat crestfallen face of Dawse Throop. Elwood, despite his looks, was a good man, and steady. And with plenty of resolution, as Brigham Young had reason to know, since he had been one of the Saints since the days of Nauvoo. So long as he was along, there would be nothing hasty done, no miscarriage of justice.

"The two of you will take a dozen men and follow this trail herd, then," he instructed. "I think that you understand your task. I shall expect a good report of you in due season."

5

Point Them West!



DESPITE the storm, it had been a quiet night at the camp. Owen had examined the trail crew which his brother had hired, and pronounced himself satisfied. Headlong and rash, Hank might have been, but when it came to cattle or anything connected with the details of the business, there was no man to beat him.

And Hank had known that the trail ahead would be a hard one; he had selected his men with care. Since the whole world, as it seemed was now trying to converge on California, and Salt Lake was on the main overland trail to the west, there were plenty of people to choose from. Single men from everywhere, who had set out with high hopes and often enough with little else—lacking in money, in equipment, in experience, and most of all in knowledge of what lay ahead of them.

By the time they straggled in to Salt Lake, plenty of them were in desperate straits. The chance to get a good job which would take them, with grub furnished, for the rest of their journey, was something to jump at. Hank had had little trouble, once the word was spread, in picking nearly a score of men who were at home in the saddle, who were trail-toughened and who knew cattle. It was a good crew.

Hank also had laid in a good stock of supplies, with which both the chuck wagon and all excess space in Cynthia Shea's wagon as well was loaded. That was one good thing to be said for this Mormon city, even by the most bitter of its enemies. It was managed by a natural leader of men, Brigham Young, peopled by honest, thrifty and hard-working people, whether or not one agreed with the tenets of their religion. The people here might and probably did with some cause, dislike the Gentiles, as they dubbed all non-Mormons. But they would sell them supplies—at a profit—and the city was a literal oasis in the desert for many a hard-pressed wayfarer.

Conditions were as favorable as could be expected. Owen slept, and awoke to find, somewhat to his surprise, that his coat was wet. It had apparently had the rain drive in upon it at some time during the night, though he had not been bothered by it. But with the sun coming out, bursting through battered clouds, it didn't matter. He tied it behind his saddle, and was briskly busy in the early dawn, returning to the fire only long enough to snatch a hasty breakfast. Big John, the cook seemed to know his business at this sort of thing. The wetness of the night had scarcely even delayed his cooking.

Cynthia gave him a smiling good-morning, her spirits obviously rising with the thought that, after the black disappointment and uncertainty of the past few days, the herd was going to move, after all. Hank Owen was dead, and would rest with the Saints—Owen smiled a little grimly at the

fancy—and both of them would remember him. But they had to go on—to do the work that Hank had started and left for them to finish.

He noted approvingly that Cynthia was astir with the rest of them. There would be no delays, waiting for her to get a beauty sleep in the morning. *She got sense—sense to fit her for the trail*, Owen decided.

The herd was moving as the light changed from gray to silver and then to a mist of rose. The leader had been singled out, a heavy-boned, wide-horned roan who swung to the point as to the manner born, with eagerness for rambling in his hoofs.

Nor was there need for instructing the crew, Owen observed, merely assigning them their places. They knew what to do, and were ready to do it, without complaint. This was better than what they had been enduring. Their course would miss the city entirely, joining the main road some miles to the west.

THE MAJOR, riding his pinto alongside, more roly-poly than ever this morning, gave a complacent twist to his mustache. "Sure, and 't is an auspicious beginnin', Jess," he commented. "And ye'll have the course well outlined in your moind by now, I've no doubt?"

Owen shrugged. "We've a lot of miles of salt desert ahead," he pointed out. "Fortunately, the cattle are in good shape, and we'll push them fast across it. They'll be gant enough by the time we reach the meadows beyond, but we should make it. After that—well, there are a few good stretches to put meat back on their bones and life in them. They'll need it for the other reaches that we've got to cross."

"It'll be tough, all right," the Major conceded. "I mind some of it. And the Indians—they'll no doubt be annoyin', around the Humboldt."

"Likely enough," Owen agreed. "It'll be no easy trail, anywhere." *I'd never have had the nerve to try it on my own accord!* he thought grimly.

The Major rubbed his nose. "And from the Humboldt?" he suggested. "Do we go by the Lassen Road and Honey Lake, or swing south for the Great Meadow?"

"We'll see, once we get that far," Owen decided. "I've small liking for what I've heard of the cut-off—but there's not too much choice, either way. Though, if a man can get that far, there's a nice stretch along the Carson, and so in to Sacramento."

"Sounds as good as any," the Major conceded. "Three routes, and only the devil knows which is the worst—or best. Ah well, 't is a fair, bright morning."

That was one good thing. You could always depend on the Major for cheerfulness. Owen caught himself smiling. He allowed his horse to drop back until he was alongside Cynthia Shea's wagon.

Cynthia was driving the big team, the horses which her father had owned on a farm in Kentucky. She handled them with easy competence, and there were few outfits anywhere along two thousand miles of trail to compare with them. On the wagon seat beside her, sagging the springs, was Mammy Green with a wide smile for all the world.

"Lawsy me," she said, pointing. "Ef'n I didn' know bettah, I'd say that was snow up ahead—or mebbby salt, Mistah Owen. Sho looks lak one or the othah. But whut am it?"

"It's salt," Owen assured her. "And that's only a beginning of it. There's enough salt in this country, if it was rightly distributed, that we wouldn't have any fresh trouble for ten million years."

"Sho's a pity it can't be done, then. Though a lil' trouble sort of spices things up, same as salt does. Kind of keeps yo' feelin' good."

"How far does it go?" Cynthia asked.

"We'll travel over and through it for days," Owen said. "I don't know too well. We'll be ready for the sight of green meadows when we reach them."

"No wonder we have to push ahead fast," she nodded. "Even where there is water. I suppose it's too salty to drink?"

"Most of it. This first push will be one of the toughest on the whole trail. But we'll make it."

"Hank said you'd take a herd anywhere," Cynthia agreed. "He insisted you'd drive to hell and back, if necessary. That nothing ever stopped you."

"Hank had a way of exaggerating," Owen said. *Though that's about what we're doing now.* "But he's right about one thing. Now that we've started, we can't afford to be stopped. We've got to get there. There's just no choice in the matter."

For the most part, this road, a cut-off of dubious reputation was free of wagons. Not many would be ahead of them, compared to what would be coming after, along all routes, a little later in the season, and once the real influence of the news of the gold strike had had time to be felt. Where there was one wagon now, there would be a hundred by mid-summer. And to take a herd across the wasteland then would be virtually out of the question.

THE MAJOR, when Cynthia questioned him, was not quite so chary of details.

"Are we following the Hastings cut-off?" she asked, and shivered a little at what the words evoked.

The Major shook his head. "The answer to that is yes and no, ma'am," he explained. "We follow it a bit at the beginnin' here, and a bit more near the end, near as I can make out. But for the most part, sure and Jess takes a way av his own. He's crossed this country before—not with cattle, but he knows the land. And knows of water to be had. Otherwise I mis-doubt that he'd have tried to do the job at all—or that Hank would have thought av it, if he hadn't counted on Jess to pull him out av trouble."

"You seem very certain that Jess can pull us out of trouble?" she suggested.

The Major smiled and gave a fresh preen to his mustache. "Ma'am," he said. "There's some, loike mesilf, for instance, that can do a job pretty, well, if it can be done. Then there's others, and they're rare as water in a desert place, who can do a job, even when by all the rules you know it can't be done at all. I've seen Jess do those sort av jobs."

Already it was getting to be an unmapped land, a wilderness of desolation. When one of the men rode back to broach one of the big kegs full of water, carried in the wagons, Owen stopped him sharply.

"I'll dole that out," he said, and added significantly. "Later. When we need it."

They moved all day at a brisk pace, the crew pushing the herd whenever they showed an inclination to stray or loiter. This was like nothing on earth that most of them had ever known before. Mostly cattle traveled across a green land, but this was a gray drabness, and the brittleness of salt beneath their hoofs was worse than dust. This was a land of thirst, with an unseen terror festering at the horizon.

They saw no one, that day, but they did come to water as night overtook them. Brackish water, a mocking oasis in a weary land. But it was fit for consumption, and there was a little coarse grass as well. It was not manna in the desert, but it was subsistence.

"Lawsy me," Mammy Green sighed. "Ain' neveh seen nothin' lak this befo'—an' I thought we'd seen ev'y-thing, comin' out f'm Kentucky. The good Lawd sho must have had a lot of left-overs when he made this land."

They were moving by daybreak, and the lines in Owen's face were a little grimmer now. He had told no one, but this would be a long and waterless drive—two days between water. Night would find them still in this waste, and there was nothing to do about it.

Today the sun seemed hotter, as though it would sweat out such mois-

ture of body as they possessed, making their task the harder. Men rode at point or drag and looked hopefully for what was not to be seen. And then, at mid-forenoon, a speck appeared on the horizon behind them, grew larger, and took the form of a man on horseback, traveling at a steady trot. Such a man could cross the waterless stretch in less than a day.

He pulled up as he came abreast, swiping a shirt-sleeve across sweaty face, looking with knowing eyes at the herd, back to the crew who shepherded them. He had a light pack behind his saddle, and his destination, as he readily admitted, was California.

"Aim to get there fast," he said. "And get me some gold. Figgered to take a short-cut across here. Saw the tracks—and if a herd of critters can make it, I can." He grinned. "Pushin' 'em pretty fast, ain't you?"

"Fast as we can," Owen admitted. "Not much choice, hereabouts."

"Mebby not." There was that same knowing grin, and Owen found it unpleasant. "I left Salt Lake late yès-tiddy. Place was buzzin' like a swarm of bees."

Obviously he had some news, which he was anxious to tell. The Major eyed him sharply.

"The place was quiet enough when we saw it last," he said.

"Looks like you got out of there just ahead of trouble, then. Seems there was a murder near town, night before last. One of the Mormons, shot down by what they call a Gentile—murdered in cold blood, they say, for the Mormon didn't have a gun on him and wasn't doin' nothing. Yep, they's blood on the moon, back there."

"Did they get the feller that done it?" the Major asked, only mildly interested.

"Not yet, seems like. But they say they know who it was. The boss of a trail-herd, that's headin' on west." He glanced, significantly, toward Owen. "Yeah, they're all stirred up. Startin' a sort of posse out to catch and kill the killer."

6

Dry Stretch



AVING delivered his news, the gold-seeker kept on. His inference was plain. This, of course, was the only trail herd moving west, or moving out of Salt Lake at all, for that matter.

Owen looked at the Major, and the latter shook his head. "Sure and I have a feelin' there's deviltry afoot, Jess," he sighed. "I've had that hunch from the minute that highway feller stuck a gun in our faces, and when he stopped a bullet, wearin' your coat, I was sure av it. What it's all about, I wish I knew. But there's that man dead, and Hank—and now, from the account, another man murdered. And the report that you did it bein' circulated abroad—it so be that he was tellin' the truth."

"What reason would he have for making it up?" Owen asked reasonably. "But if he was, and there's a bunch of them after us, what's delayin' them? It's a plain trail—and they could have caught us before we left at all, in that case."

"Providin' it's true, there's but one thing I can think of," the Major nodded. "We've a strong force, should it come to a fight—until the desert wears us down a bit. And in such a case, they'd maybe like it better, way off from their sainted city, and where no one ever passes. Dry bones in the desert are only dry bones, at best."

There was disconcerting logic to that. Owen felt that the Major was probably right. This was making a pattern, and an ugly one.

"Ye'll pardon the question, Jess, but sure and I've often wondered. How come that Curran would be a cousin to yourself and Hank?"

So you're thinking the same way as

I am! Owen thought. "Cousin by marriage," he said shortly.

Only the two of them had heard that news. There was no sense in telling the others. If trouble caught up, they could give it a warm reception.

The cattle were doing well enough today. The first day's drive had been hard, but they were in good condition, and there had been water at evening. Yet by early afternoon they were showing signs of restlessness again, and the riders had a strained look. Then a steer raised its head and sniffed the air, and the big leader quickly followed suit. Others did the same. Their drooping heads began to lift, the pace to quicken a little, and one of the riders rode up excitedly.

"They smell water," he said. "I never used to think I'd live to see the time when that news would mean more to me than word that I'd staked a rich claim—but right now it sure takes top place."

"They aim to swing to the right," Owen replied, and his voice was tight. *Here's the first taste of real hell,* he thought. "Get in and keep them pushing. Don't let them turn."

"You mean—that water's bad?"

"Worse than that. It's poison. I might as well tell you boys now. There's no more drinkable water before tomorrow night. Keep them moving!"

BLANKNESS drifted across eager faces for a moment, replaced by grimness. Theyd known this would be bad, and here it was. But the disappointment of the herd, even of the now restive horses, who also had smelled water, water which had a fresh, clean odor to it, untainted by salt, was pathetic. It was also ugly.

They were inclined to be sullen, the steers tossing long horns clashingly, cayuses champing on bits and bucking a bit. Then, frustrated, they were in the mood to make a fight for it. If there was water, and they knew it was there, they wanted it. But the men equally grim, shoved them by—lifting hoarse voices, swinging short

ropes, crackling anger in their own tones.

The fact that, off in the distance, they could not see the cool gleam of water—deep pools of it lying cupped in what had all the look of a cool oasis—made it only the more bitter. But now the men could see the other sign as well—white, bleached bones, large and small, scattered here and there like markers.

Sunset brought a welcome coolness, but no break in a weary land. The water in the kegs, used sparingly, was precious as gold. Owen allowed each man to give a mouthful to his horse, but only that. Then the cayuses licked and nosed at the cans, the cattle crowded eagerly, lowing. Their own portions were warm and brackish in their mouths.

They were some distance away from the cut-off, but most of them had heard the news of that dread distance between two waterless points—of men and stock alike who had died along its sunscorched miles.

This route which the herd was following would be better, if farther—save for the fact, as Owen knew all too well, that very soon even the scant water along it would be gone. Even now it was a gamble.

They rested, and moved along again for a couple of added hours. The herd, tired as it was, was slow about bedding down; they milled and bawled piteously, and snuffed at the unfriendly, grayish earth. And the next day, Owen knew, would be worse.

He kept watch for the first half of the night, along with half the crew, riding about the uneasy herd, looking back whence they had come. If their suspicions were correct, now would be a good time for an avenging party to strike. Few indeed would ever find evidence in this bleak place; a few added bones made no difference in a lost land.

The Major took his place for the second part of the night, but when they marched ahead of the sun, there had been no alarums. The sun seemed to press at them, even this early. There was no cool freshness such as

morning usually brings. Only a heaviness of down-beating heat, a wavery sort of mirage on the horizon.

There was no vegetation here. Only the gray bleakness, like snow, covered by a dirty coat of dust. Yet there was no snow. Even lizards and coyotes seemed to shun this place. Owen wondered, briefly, if Hank had had any conception of what he was proposing, in the first place; Hank had never crossed desert country.

AS THOUGH the thought of him had conjured her up, he turned to see Cynthia, on horseback, riding to join him. She fell into place alongside, pushing back damp strands of hair from her forehead. A starched sunbonnet had lost most of its form in the last day or so, but was still a shade of sorts. From under it, her face showed the strain and weariness which was upon every one.

"I think that perhaps I owe you an apology," she said directly. "This wasn't your fault, or your doing—any of it. It was Hank's. And yet I practically forced you into it."

"Don't let it worry you," Owen said. "I'd have had to do it anyway, if Hank had lived."

Cynthia pushed back her bonnet a little and regarded him gravely. "I'm beginning to understand," she nodded. "Hank had never learned to stand on his own feet, had he? He looked like a man, and he made big talk, which sounded fine. But he always figured that, no matter how big a fool he made of himself, he could always depend on you to somehow get him out of it."

There was a half-guilty feeling in Owen. Hank was dead and Hank had meant well. Always, Hank had meant well. Yet there was truth in what she said, and something in him felt released to hear her say it.

"I'm glad you're here," Cynthia said, breaking the silence, and she smiled at him. "I have the same feeling about you, in a place like this."

She turned, rode back to the wagon, and he held himself in tight check to keep from following her. Those

words didn't mean what he had wildly tried to read into them—nothing like that at all. They only meant that she was sure—or hoped she might be—that, having led them into this wilderness, he could find a way out again.

THE CATTLE were ganting fast. There was mournful pleading in their throats now, as they moved ahead, apathetic under the urge of the riders. It was a sound like a dirge, moaning up from a thousand throats. And the sun was hotter, with no breath of air stirring, no shade. Mammy Green's black face glistened under the awning as she fanned herself, but she had a cheerful smile as he approached the wagon again.

"I'm keepin' sharp watch on them watah kegs," she said. "Nobody gettin' none o' that 'cept what yo' say! And Lawsy, man! Heah I could drink 'em all dry mahse'f, and not half try!"

Owen felt the same. There could not be water enough, anywhere, to satisfy the thirst that was upon him. His tongue, despite the occasional small portions of brackish, warmish water which he doled out, had a rusty feeling. His whole body cried out for water, and now he could hardly even sweat. The moisture had been cooked out of him. He saw uneasiness in even the Major's face as he came riding alongside.

"How far you reckon now, Jess?" he asked. "To water?"

"Ought to reach it before sundown," Owen said, more cheerfully than he felt. On the horizon he could see a mirage, and he guessed that the others could see it as well. It had the look of a cool stream, deep and wide, surrounded by green trees and green grass. Some of the more inexperienced had been wildly excited at the first mirage or so, certain that they saw water ahead. Now they too, regarded such things with a jaundiced eye. There was a sort of hopelessness growing in them.

Some of it was in himself. Because all that he had to go on was his memory of distances, of the average time

required to cover them. Out here there were no landmarks, and guesses were all that remained of what had been certainties in cooler moments; you knew that nothing could be better than guesses, in such a land.

He watched the herd with a wary eye. Water-famished as they were, they could smell it a long way off. Miles, in fact. He hoped to see a lifting of heads, a new interest come to them. That would be the sign. There ought to be such a sign now.

Not a head was lifting. They moved because forced along, heads lowered, that tormented, pitiful bawling deep in their throats. Grimly, Owen rode on ahead; he had to know.

The herd was behind, now, a vague blot on the landscape. And here was the place, just as he had remembered it—he hadn't lost his sense of direction or of distance. Just as he remembered—except that where there had been water there was now barrenness. Not even a trace of wetness remained, nor a sign of mud.



Riders Of The Night



OWEN RODE back. For a mile he had been forced to fight himself, to keep down the panic rising in him, like a ferment. At such a time as this, when he needed them most, a man's faculties were not up to their best.

His face was grim, his voice crisp and incisive as he came up and broke the news. "We'll keep travelin'. There's no water—where it should be. We'll have to travel all night; it'll be cooler. And by morning we'll reach water. I know it will be there, no chance of that being dry. Plenty of water, and grass. We've got to keep them moving."

No one said anything. There was only a slosh in the water kegs now.

Even doled out as it had been, water went fast under such conditions. Lips were cracking, tongues beginning to swell. Not badly, so far as the humans were concerned; they had had the best of it. But here and there a beast was beginning to stop, refusing to go farther, despite all efforts to force it. One would stand, or stagger, and lie down. Sprawling out, already with the look of a dead one. Soon to be dead; the weaker ones were falling out.

Here, finally, was the curtain of night, the red ball of fire that had hung in the west no longer a torment in their eyes. It brought a little coolness, and the weary herd revived a little.

Ordinarily, it was not easy to drive by night. Cattle had a way of acting up, of straying in the dark; now save to keep stragglers from stopping, there was none of that. They still moved, apathetically, too tired for any sort of foolishness.

An hour or so of rest would help a lot, but Owen dared not stop. It was too doubtful if they could ever start them again. The chuck wagon served sandwiches, but few took them, though no one had eaten since breakfast. There was no liquid to wash them down, and it was an effort to swallow dry food.

The everlasting gray sand and salt crunched under wagon wheels, in a sound not like that of straight sand or good dirt or rock. Time lost its meaning. And then, hardly daring to believe, Owen observed a change. Heads that had drooped as though life was all gone out of them, began to lift. There was a new, excited bawling. The pace quickened of its own accord. The herd smelled water!

Now arose a new problem. The water, up ahead, as Owen knew, was not of the best. No clear-running stream, nor anything like it. There was marshy ground, and pools of brackish, half-stagnant water. Water which could be drunk, but when you had said that you had said it all.

Thirsty as they were, the herd would begin to run soon. Nothing

could stop them, turn them nor hold them from their desire this time. Reaching water, they would plunge in to it and lower their heads and drink. And crowding behind them would come the maddened mass of the herd, intent also on reaching water, crazed at being stopped. That half-swampy ground could be treacherous, deadly as the desert they were leaving behind, but in a different way. Half the herd might perish here, with salvation at hand, unless they were handled right.

The horses were scenting the water now as well, showing new life, becoming restive. Owen fought his own to control, then spurred to spread the word. "We've got to get there, and spread them out," he warned. "Keep them from piling up—or bogging down!"

MOST OF these men knew what he meant. They needed no further directions, and rode grimly. None of them needed to be warned of their own danger. Here was a super-human job which must be done, and they were the ones to do it. But a man or a horse, caught in that mad surge, would be hopelessly out of luck if his horse stumbled, or sank in the swampy ground.

They could still outrun the staggering herd, the cayuses. They got a little ahead, and then charged in to the oncoming mass of it, shouting hoarsely, flailing with quirts and lariats, the horses biting, kicking, squealing. For the moment their own thirst and weariness was forgotten in the job which had to be done.

They did it, somehow. Splitting the bunch, shoving some of the leaders ahead once water was reached, before they could drink much, making room for more to come. Still pushing to one side and the other. Keeping them on the move for what seemed an interminable time—a jerky sort of move, with many stops to plunge heads down and suck up brackish, muddy water. Some of it was water, some little more than mud; but it was wet.

Now and again the horses would lower their heads to suck up a few swallows as well, fighting the bit as they were jerked away. There was salvation for beasts in this constant pressing, so that they could not drink too much too fast. Here, with coarse grass and mud underfoot, there was a welcome smell of wetness, however stale and brackish it might be.

For the most part the footing was fairly good, and few bogged down. Finally they could turn and move ahead to deeper, cooler water which the impatient herd had not reached or stirred, and get a drink for themselves. Not a satisfying drink, nor good tasting. But water. Owen gave warning.

"Go easy on it," he advised. "It'll be better, boiled in coffee. Otherwise it'll make you sick."

Mostly they heeded him, because of the taste. But it was life-saving. And the grass, while coarse and poor, was food. The worst of this first stretch was behind them.

DAWN WAS in the air when Owen slept. Most of the others were doing the same. The cattle would do no straying today; they would spend the day and the night here, resting, allowing the herd to eat their fill of such fodder as the place afforded, to put on lost pounds in liquid again. There was still a hard pull ahead before the Humboldt was reached.

It was amazing, the difference that twenty-four hours of rest, of eating and drinking, could make. There was new life in the herd when they went on again. Life and energy which they would have great need of before the rest of the trail was covered.

"Reckon they'll be kinda tough and stringy beef, time we reach Californy," one of the men commented, grinning through a new ragged thatch of whiskers. "Take good strong teeth to chew a steak off'n 'em."

He was right, of course. And yet, if they could reach the green grass of a California valley and give them a few weeks to recover on it, they

would be in pretty good shape and a most welcome addition to scanty diets, Owen knew. Hank's foresight had been sound enough on that point, or the prices which men would pay for beef. It was getting them there which still worried him.

There had been no sign of the men from Salt Lake—no sign of anyone else save themselves. Which could mean a lot, or nothing.

There would be no more such desperate, waterless stretches as they had already passed—not before they reached the Humboldt; Owen knew that. But he knew that there were still long dry stretches in between.

Day followed day now, monotonously alike. It was a gray white land, save for rare stretches of grass or water, and Cynthia, riding complaining in the creaking wagon knew wonder at it all—but chiefly at Jess Owen, who was leading them through this wilderness somewhat like a Moses of old. It was small wonder that Hank Owen had wanted Jess along on this trip, had counted on the fact that Jess would show up to pilot him. It seemed to her that no other man could have done it.

Now, at last, they were getting back to that even worse trail across the wasteland—the cut-off. And here were a few hardy souls who had braved it, not knowing what it meant. An occasional wagon or traveler on horseback. All of them were alive. The worst of the season, and consequently the worst of the road, lay some weeks ahead.

Conditions were improving when they sighted what looked like columns of smoke in the distance. Cynthia mentioned it, and the Major nodded and gave a fresh twist to his mustache.

"Sure, and it's steam you see," he said. "Off close beside the Humboldt. Steam from boilin' hot water. There's a lot av hot springs hereabouts. Like as if the devil wasn't satisfied with the heat overhead. Here it's under you as well."

Hot springs! Cynthia viewed the steam with lively interest. She had

little practical knowledge of this trail to California. Her studies and interest, until recently, had all lain with that other road which forked a while back and went north to the rich lands of Oregon.

"What's the Humboldt like?" she asked. "If we follow it, that ought to make good going, along a river."

"Sure and it would seem so—but that don't make it so," the Major sighed. "The Humboldt's a quare apology for a river—risin' up out av nothin', as you might say, then runnin' be fits and jerks through a bad land, and finally peterin' out, losin' itself in the desert again. A river that starts from nowhere and gets to the same place. And whin we lose it, you can figure for yourself that there's more unpleasantness ahead. Though up here, at least where we're reachin' it, 't is quite a river."

They came to an open valley, filled with the vivid green of greasewood, a welcome change from the drabness through which they had been passing. Off to the south reared the jagged snow-capped peaks of the Rubies. And then, ahead of them, yawning in grim proof that the country was changing, was the canyon of the South Fork.

"'T is an unfriendly gorge," the Major nodded, studying it. "But much to be preferred to some av the country we've come past. And it looks like we were in luck."

"How do you mean?" Cynthia asked.

"There's good grass hereabouts, ye'll note. And that's a sure sign av plenty of rain. Which helps the herd. And in spite of it, we seem to be arrivin' at a time when we can keep travelin'."

Cynthia's brows wrinkled, at this seemingly contradictory statement. "I'd think that plenty of rain would be a blessing, especially in such a dry country," she exclaimed.

"Sure, and it is—save for the fact that we have to do a lot av fordin' as we follow the canyon, and had we chanced to find it with the water too high—well, too much can be near as

bad as not enough. But I reckon we'll make it through all right. I don't know these canyons meself, but Jess has been through them. We'll make camp now; he's signalin', and that means tackle it in the mornin'."

IN OBEDIENCE to the signal from up ahead, the wagons pulled off, and the herd fell eagerly to grazing. Here at least were many things to be thankful for, and it would be close to paradise, after what they had endured of late.

Owen, like the rest of them, was in a cheerful frame of mind. There would be plenty of grief ahead, but they had taken one bad hurdle, and had lost comparatively few head. That smell of water had come barely in time to keep a quarter of the herd moving, but its magic had transmuted the needed energy into them.

In the distance there was the smoke of a party of emigrants, two or three wagons drawn up, tiny and lonesome-seeming in the immensity of the canyon. For the moment, at least, there was no sign of any Indians—neither the good-natured, usually friendly Diggers, nor the implacable Utes, though the latter would not be likely to show themselves until they were ready for trouble. *We'll be lucky if we don't see plenty of them before we go much farther!* Owen thought.

Now they were back on the main road again. Those who took the uncertain cut-off, or those who came down from the north, all joined hereabouts and continued to follow the one trail for a while. There were more branches of the great trail on ahead, but here it was a matter of follow the canyon to go at all.

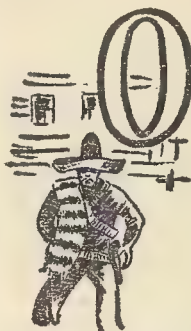
Big John was doing his best tonight, assisted by Mammy Green. With fuel, water and extra supplies available, they were making up for the lean days of the desert. Dusk was closing over the camp when Owen heard the clop-clop of horses' hoofs, and looked up to see a pair of riders approaching.

He had almost forgotten the tale told by that lone rider, back in the

beginning of the salt desert. Days had passed, and no vengeance seekers had overtaken them. Here were only two Yet something cold went through him at sight of them, and a sudden uncanny certainty was in him. Here again was trouble—such trouble as had pounced at Salt Lake City, and now, having taken a breather, was stirring again.

8

Friends



WEN was right. Dawse Throop rode in the lead, Eliphallet Elwood a little way behind him, like a loosely-jouncing scarecrow in the saddle. Two things had acted on Throop's eagerness to pounce and get the job done with, far back on the

trail, restraining him. One was Elwood, sent along by Brigham Young with just that thought in mind.

He was a sincere man, was Elwood, a Mormon because of conviction rather than expediency, as in the case of Throop. Long years of trouble and hardship had taught him patience, and an essential sense of fair-mindedness had shown him that, human nature being what it was, there was usually some of right and of wrong on both sides.

"We don't want to be in any hurry," he had told Throop, back at the start. "For the next few days, while they're crowdin' through this bad stretch of country, they'll be keyed-up and red-eyed for trouble. What we want's to get the facts in the case. We can do that a lot easier, a little farther along. Be better to wait."

Dawse Throop, like Trane, who rode with them, had chafed restively at such counsel, but he had realized that it might be better to wait until a greater distance was between them and Brigham Young, before taking action contrary to the leader's orders.

And Greer Curran, who had shown up as well, had nodded in agreement.

"That's one of the toughest stretches on the whole road to California," he had pointed out. "And I don't know it very well—neither do any of you. Let Owen take the herd across it. I want that bunch of beef—and I want those critters to reach California. We can afford to wait a few days, while the rest of them do some of the hard work."

So here they were at the fresh green of the Humboldt. Now, riding forward, Elwood lifted a hand in greeting. Throop, dismounting, swaggered forward truculently.

"So we've caught up with you!" he said, and his eyes were on Owen's coat. "Black an' white coat, just like they said!"

"Just what," Owen asked. "Are you talkin' about?" Though it all made a pattern. Throop's eyes were on Cynthia, where she sat on the wagon tongue, and the look in them stirred added resentment in Owen.

Throop brought his gaze back to Owen, slowly, reluctantly. He spat, hands on hips. "Reckon you ought to be able to guess," he said. "but if you want the story, why, there was a killin', back in a 'dobe near Salt Lake, a few nights ago. Night before yore bunch pulled out p'intin' west. One of the Saints murdered. Plenty of witnesses saw it done. Two Gentiles had come to that house, wantin' a drink—which ain't allowable to the Saints, but findin' that out mebbey made the Gentiles mad."

Usually, Throop disdained Mormon terminology, but he was using it now for his companion's benefit. "The folks who saw the killin' done, said that the feller was wearin' a black an' white checked coat—and packin' a six-shooter, which he used. The man he killed, a feller named Burton, was shot down in cold blood, and he didn't have any gun on him. That's murder, and that's what we're talkin' about. The Saints was boilin' mad when the news got out."

CYNTHIA AND the cowboys, gathering closer, had listened in amazement and mounting anger as the

implication became clear. Cynthia came to her feet now, her eyes flashing. "Are you suggesting that Mr. Owen—that anyone here, could have had anything to do with such a killing?" she demanded. "It's ridiculous!"

Elwood spoke placatingly, shuffling his feet.

"Right now, we're actin' as a sort o' committee of inquiry, to try and find out the facts," he explained. "On orders of Brigham Young. He told us to follow up this trail herd, bein' as some from it was named, and find out what we could. We was to make sure of our facts, and see that justice was done, both ways. His orders was to make sure that nobody innocent was punished."

"And to make sure that the guilty didn't escape." Throop cut in roughly. "Which we aim to do. If it hadn't been for Brigham, there'd have been half of the Saints out to yore camp, stringin' you to the nearest tree, before you could git out of the country. Only he wouldn't have nothin' like that."

There were, so far as showed now, only the two of them, but the boldness with which they had ridden into this camp, the outspoken truculence of Throop convinced Owen that they must have a considerable crew behind them, and not far off.

It was a soft sound, coming out of the gloom—the soft padding of bare feet. And then Owen saw them. Indians. But friendly Indians: a deputation of the Diggers.

He had encountered them on a previous journey through this section, without pleasure. Hereabouts, any time now, they might be bothered by Utes, who were dangerous, war-like, generally hostile, and implacable horse-thieves. Most Indians, including the Utes, were more or less impressive, whatever else you might think of them. But the Diggers, to his mind, were merely pitiful.

Most whites called them the Diggers, from their habit of digging for small rodents, bugs, insects, worms—also roots, or anything even remotely edible. They were really the Shoshokoes—a small, straggling remnant of a people, filthy, twisted, always hungry, ever on the thin verge of

starvation, yet somehow managing to exist, and almost always friendly to the white men—though with a canny eye to friendship and gifts in return. Now a deputation of half a score of them were coming, bearing gifts.

A Digger, Owen knew, would eat anything—grasshoppers, lizards, ants, snakes—to say the least, they were not particular. Now, profiting by past experience and hoping for larger gifts in turn, they were bringing of their best—several small fish, in advanced stages of decomposition, and a couple of dead rats, hanging by their tails. Probably using the hot springs provided by nature, these had been boiled, since whites, as the Diggers had discovered, seemed for some reason to like their meat well cooked. Nothing had been removed, for they did not believe in waste. It was all there—ears, eyes, feet, tail and so forth.

Throop, annoyed at the interruption, turned to eye them in some amazement, which gave place to anger and disgust.

"Get out!" he said, and took a threatening step forward, but Owen stopped him by stepping in front of him.

"Not so fast," he warned. "This happens to be our camp—not yours!"

"Well, if you like them stinkin' critters, I suppose it's a matter of taste," Throop growled. "Some of 'em showed up at our camp, and I mighty soon got rid of them!"

"I didn't invite 'em here—or you, either," Owen said shortly, and to Big John. "Give them something, and shoo them away as soon as you can. And keep an eye on everything that's loose!"

Secretly he was a little relieved. So long as the Diggers were coming in, it meant that the rest of Throop's crew would not be too close at hand; and, even more to the point, the Utes were unlikely to be around tonight. The Diggers had their uses, if you understood them.

Big John, assisted by Mammy Green, was rummaging for something which would be a proper gift. But the Diggers solved that for themselves. A steer had been butchered, to

afford fresh meat for supper and for the next couple of days. The hide, head, hoofs and offal was off at some distance, and now they had discovered this. Gleefully they helped themselves. Here was a real windfall, most excellent provender, none of which should be wasted.

ELWOOD HAD not liked any of this, up to now. He was a meek man, but like most of the meek, he could be stubborn on occasion. He had welcomed the diversion. Now, as the Diggers faded into the night, he took control.

"I'm afraid we've been kinda brash about this," he apologized. "Throop here, he means well, but he gets sorta over-zealous sometimes. My name's Elwood," he added, half-apologetically "Eliphalet Elwood."

Owen nodded, but made no offer to shake hands or to introduce the others. But Elwood gave Throop a look which kept him silent for the moment.

"What happened back at Deseret is pretty much the way he told it," he went on. "This killing and all. And it does seem that two men had ridden in to that house. One wearin' a coat—all black and white checks, everyone said. His companion was heard to call him Owen."

"And I reckon that's your name, eh?" Throop challenged.

"Wait," Elwood cautioned, and held up a broad calloused hand. "What we're doin', now, is tellin' what plenty witnesses had to say. But we aim to hear your side of it, too. There's generally two sides to any case, when it comes to that."

Owen found himself liking Elwood. It was plain that he wanted to be fair. "Owen's my name," he agreed. "What else?"

"Well, this man, wearin' that coat, called *his* friend Major. Also it seemed like they was with a big herd of cattle, that was going to be taken on West." He coughed, apologetically. "That's what happened, with plenty of witnesses to testify. Like Throop says, the people was so stirred that there'd have been bloodshed, if Brigham Young hadn't forbidden it."

"But it's ridiculous," Cynthia protested. "I don't mean about the murder. If you say that happened, I suppose it did. But to accuse Mr. Owen or Major McCord of anything like that. They wouldn't think of doing such a thing."

"Who else'd be wearin' that coat, or usin' them names?" Throop challenged. "I ain't never saw another coat to match that, nowhere in this country."

That was logic. Owen remembered now that the coat had been wet the next morning, after this thing was said to have occurred. He had noticed it at the time, but had assumed that the storm had beaten in farther during the night than he had supposed. Now he began to wonder if the coat might have been purloined, used for such a purpose, and returned. This was beginning to have the look of a put-up job.

"That's an interestin' question," he drawled. "I can tell you one thing, though. *I* didn't wear it that night."

The Major had been listening, twisting indignantly at his mustaches. Now he boiled over. "'T is an outrage," he said. "Beggorra, imputin' such things to Jess here—or to meself! Sure and anyone who knows us, would tell ye what a ridiculous thing it is!"

"That's an easy thing to say, with no one around who knows you," Throop sneered. "There was this killin'—cold-blooded murder. And they did that talkin', callin' each other by name, before any trouble started, or was expected to. That, and the coat, seems to me to be clinchin' evidence."

"You say that it was the night before any trouble started, or was expected to. That, and the coat, seems to me to be clinchin' evidence."

"You say that it was the night before we started west with this herd, that this happened?" Cynthia asked.

"It sure was. And the way you pulled out in a mighty big hurry then—"

"What hour was it, that this thing happened?" she persisted, speaking to Elwood, interrupting Throop's tirade. Elwood explained carefully. He had taken the trouble to ascertain all

the known facts before starting out on this mission.

By now, all the crew were crowding closer, angered at this imputation, defiant. But Owen noticed that Throop did not appear worried.

Cynthia listened, nodding a time or so, asking more probing questions. She had taken the initiative completely away from Throop, who watched her with a look which sent the angry red to Owen's face. At the conclusion, she nodded.

"I can see how things might have been assumed as it seems that they were, Mr. Elwood," she said. "It appears that someone did this thing deliberately, to create an unfavorable impression against us—or perhaps to throw suspicion away from themselves. What better way could they find, than to try and pin it on strangers who were passing through the country?"

"But I can tell you for a fact that there's no truth in it!" Her voice rang, her eyes were flashing now, and gone was the quiet, sober little person that Owen had known. "Mr. Owen and Major McCord were both in camp that evening, during the time which you say this thing happened! I know that of my own observation, for I was in my wagon, and with the drumming of the rain, the thought of starting on the morrow, and all, I couldn't get to sleep. More than once I looked out. I saw Mr. Owen and the Major talking together. Later I saw where Mr. Owen had rolled in his blankets, under the chuck wagon."

"That was a rainy night, like you just said, and darker'n the insides of a cow," Throop blurted. "You musta had mighty good eyesight, to see all that."

Elwood looked angrily at him. Gentlemen did not cast such aspersions on the truthfulness of a lady. But Cynthia answered, quietly again now. "There was still the light from the cook-fire. It lasted quite a while." She turned, gestured to the others of the crew. "Some of them were around as well. Question them, if you like."

"We're backin' up yore story to the hilt, Miss Cynthia," Big John spoke up. "I got up and got some of the

wood an' put it under cover, I remember, so's to have some dry, come mornin'. Owen was there all the time."



To The Hilt



ELWOOD listened, stroking his long chin. Then he professed himself as satisfied. "This evidence seems to be convincin'," he said. "Looks like there's been a mistake made somewhere—or, like has been suggested, somebody has been try-

in' to throw suspicion on you folks and away from themselves. Our orders, from Brigham Young himself, are to get to the bottom of the matter and see that justice is done. But it's false trail."

"I'm not so sure of that as you seem to be," Throop grunted. "It's only natural that a crew like this 'd all tell the same story." He was angry, disgruntled with the way things had done. He had orders from Curran, and until this job was finished to Curran's satisfaction, there would be no additional pay. Likewise, he was getting tired of this bleak trail. And, as an added factor, Trane, who had hired him in the first place, and who was one of the company he had brought along, would not approve the way he had handled this, he knew. Trane wanted that pay, too.

Elwood said nothing, and Throop went on. "Like's been said, we aim to get to the bottom of this. If you was there, in camp, all evenin', and had yore coat, how come the killer to be wearin' it? We'll mebbly be back later to ask some more questions. I got to be satisfied, same as Elwood, 'fore this is settled. And I ain't satisfied yet."

"We've answered all the questions we aim to," one of the crew spoke up. "We don't like yore looks, mister, nor the way you act. Come back ag'in

and we mebbly won't treat you so dummed polite, but more the way you deserve."

Throop shrugged. "That's about the sort of answer I expected," he retorted. "As to how you'd treat us—we ain't such greenies as to ride in here alone, where we knew what sort of a reception we'd be gettin'. We head a considerable expedition, sent out to get to the truth, and then to see about administerin' justice. And we aim to do it; don't forget that."

With that parting threat, he allowed Elwood to lead him away. Elwood, he knew, was convinced that they were telling the truth. And that was the devil of it. Elwood, left to his own devices, could soon sway the rest of the crew to his way of thinking, for they too, did not like this trail, nor being away from home.

They were a rough bunch, and Throop had had the main hand in selecting them. He had picked them because he figured they would do as he said. Which they would, so long as he could keep them under his influence.

The rub there was that, with the single exception of Trane, they were all Mormons. And, unlike Throop himself, they respected and rather feared Brigham Young, who was, to them, both spiritual and temporal leader. If Elwood reminded them of that, he'd have them pretty much under his thumb.

And if that happened—a shiver of apprehension coursed through Throop. They were both walking now, leading their horses. Throop had started to swing to his own saddle, then, seeing Elwood choosing to walk, had followed. A new idea taking shape in his mind.

He had, he saw now, badly underestimated his co-leader of this expedition at the start, regarding him as a sort of an old woman, but nothing to be worried about. Now he was beginning to see that there was a dogged sort of persistence, coupled with a shrewd intelligence, in this man. Which, of course, was why Brigham Young had selected him.

It would be like Elwood to keep on

probing until he did find the truth, and the guilty man. Which might not be too hard to do. And in that case, these other Saints would follow his leadership, of course. This was a thing which needed to be nipped in the bud.

Throop glanced back. There was a sprinkling of stars overhead, a thin thread of golden moon just appearing above the valley's rim. Not much light, but enough to see vague outlines. In it, he made out that Owen had left the group about the fire, and was following them at some distance, to make sure, apparently, they pulled out without trying any tricks.

Another prickle of apprehension tingled along Throop's spine. This Jess Owen was a dangerous man. Anyone who could bring a herd across that dry stretch, this far, knew his business. And he knew now that he was involved in this thing, and was therefore on his guard.

"You really believe that yarn they told?" Throop demanded now. And there was more to the question than his companion sensed.

"Of course I believe it," Elwood answered impatiently. "It's easy to see that they're tellin' the truth."

"Then how do you explain what all them witnesses had to tell?" Throop asked.

"That's what I'm wonderin' about," Elwood retorted. "There's a lot of things that I reckon will bear lookin' into—and a lot closer home than this."

A fresh shiver of apprehension went through Throop. The blundering fool might keep right on until he did stumble on the truth.

THIS DEMANDED action, and promptly. And Throop had prepared himself for it, with the notion, vague at first, running more strongly through his mind with each passing minute of the last half-hour.

Luck of a sort had been with him, back there at the cowboys camp. Attention had all been focused, momentarily, on the newly-arrived Diggers, and the fantastic gifts which they were offering. And something had caught the light and reflected it back,

from where the cook had laid it. A long-bladed knife, used by Big John in his culinary operations. A bootcher, as Throop called it. Big John had sliced steaks for supper that night.

No one had observed Throop as he appropriated the knife. Now Elwood was walking a little ahead of him, and the night was dark. Throop wasted no time. He leaned a little ahead, driving the blade with all the strength of his arm. It struck Elwood between the shoulder-blades, directly over the heart, and went in smoothly. Straight to the hilt.

Elwood never knew what hit him. He grunted, but that was all, and wavered for a moment in his tracks, then slumped forward on his face. His legs thrashed spasmodically, and were still.

Throop's horse reared back, jerking at the reins, snorting. Elwood's horse ran wildly a few paces, then calmed. Throop controlling his own cayuse with a violent jerk on the reins, stood, looking down at his victim. He glanced back through the gloom, and saw that Owen, satisfied, was returning to camp, a vague blur now in the distance. This was just about perfect, so far.

Throop swung to the saddle and rode on, another quarter of a mile to where his crew was waiting, ready to come ahead at a signal or gun-shot. He eyed them sardonically as he approached. Whether they knew it or not, they were his crew now. With Elwood out of the way, he was the undisputed boss. And he knew that he could use them exactly as he pleased. Trane would be a good help in *that*.

They looked up expectantly as he approached, and now the sliver of moon was well above the canyon's rim, giving a fair light. Throop shrugged as he dismounted.

"We had a talk with 'em," he said. "They deny it, of course. But it looks to me like they're the ones we're after. Elwood, they kind of made him a mite doubtful, but there wan't no reason to it. Since he wanted to do all the gabbin', I got disgusted and come on. When he gets tired, I reckon he'll be along, too."

That story fitted in very well with the temperament of Elwood, and no one questioned it. They waited, lounging about, while the minutes ticked away on the big watch which one man owned. Finally Throop jumped to his feet, casting an anxious eye about.

"He'd ought to a been here sooner'n this," he exclaimed. "I didn't figger he was in no danger—but mebbey we better take a look."

Accompanied by Trane and two other men, he started back, going on foot. It was one of the others who all but stumbled over Elwood's body, lying there, bloody and stiffening, in the trail, the knife still buried to the hilt. The others crowded around, exclaiming, looking down.

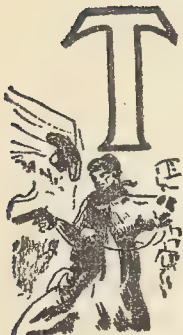
"Murdered!" Throop ejaculated. "Some one o' the damn skunks sneaked up an' knifed him in the back, while he was comin' back! He musta been walkin'. He must have found out somethin' more than they didn't aim for him to tell us!"

That had a logical sound. Particularly as everyone there knew that Throop had carried no knife when he went away.

"If we needed any more proof, reckon we got it right here," Throop lashed at them. "One of you go back an' bring the rest of the boys. Then we'll go ahead an' pay them another visit—an' this time," he added ominously. "It won't be just to ask questions!"

10

The Coyotes Howl



THAT was the needed touch. Save for Trane, who knew his companion very well indeed, it did not occur to any of the others that Throop himself might have murdered his fellow-leader. Now they were at the boiling point. When the others had returned and viewed the sprawled body of Elwood, they caught

fire fast. Most of them, like Throop, had chafed a little at Elwood's restraining influence, his temperate counsels, up to now. They were a hot-headed lot, carefully picked because they hated the Gentiles; and because, as Throop had good reason to suspect, almost every one, in their own Gentile days, had been lawless men who had sought refuge under what had seemed to them a good banner of shelter.

But, now that he was dead, they counted Elwood as one of them. Doubly so because, counseling temperance, he had been murdered. What they felt was as righteous a wrath as they were capable of feeling.

"Let's go back an' clean them out," one of the men growled. "They are an abomination in the sight of the Lord!"

Throop hid a grin at such an expression, coming from such a source. But he was thinking fast. It wouldn't do to just barge in on the camp of the cattlemen, with blood in their eye. If they did, they would be given the same sort of reception, and the cowboys outnumbered them. He pointed this out.

"We've got to handle this the way Brigham 'd want it done," he added. "We'll all go now and show the rest of that crew what's happened—and see how they act then. But you let me handle this. Brigham picked me for the job because he knew I was the man for it. I don't aim to make no mistakes like poor Eliphalet done. Nor to get us killed off for nothin'. If they're fair an' reasonable, fine. If they ain't, there's more'n one way of skinnin' a cat—and it's our job to see that jestice is done."

They approved that. These easy references to Brigham, whom most of them had never even been on speaking terms with, impressed them. It gave the idea, as Throop intended that it should, that he and their leader were very good friends indeed. He led the way now, the others following.

"What if they don't agree?" Trane demanded, and grimaced. "For we know good an' well that they won't."

Throop eyed his bewhiskered, knobby companion, and grinned as un-

feelingly as though his palm had never pushed on the handle of a boot-cher.

"In that case," Throop said. "We'll draw back in good order, and wait for a chance. There'll be plenty of 'em, in the canyons ahead."

Trane nodded. That sort of a program appealed to him much more than a fight against superior odds. "We can get more'n the country to fight on our side," he added significantly. "I can see to that."

Throop eyed him a moment, understandingly. "Me and you should a teamed up a long time ago, Trane," he agreed. "We'd be rich by now. I reckon we soon will be, anyway."

"Since I'm a Saint now, too, there ain't no wrong in how you treat these Gentiles," Trane grinned.

"That's right," Throop nodded. "I never knew before that bein' a religious man could be so all-fired convenient. Reckon they's a lot more to this than Brigham or Joe ever figured on."

OWEN HAD been about to pull off his boots and roll in his blanket when he had sighted them coming, and alerted the rest of his crew. His quick eye, ranging over the thirteen of them, failed to find Elwood. And that in itself might be significant.

"What do you want this time?" he demanded.

"We want justice, like we said before—and we aim to have it," Throop answered truculently. "And you know damn well what we mean!"

"Sure, and 't would seem the man takes us for mind-readers," the Major murmured.

"Mebby most of you don't know what's been going on," Throop grunted. "I'm willin' to give you the benefit of the doubt. And to figger that most of you are fair-minded men that've been bad fooled. We told you before about the killin' that had gone on, back at Salt Lake. Elwood, my partner, he was fooled by you, more or less. Which was a dumb fool thing to be. See this?"

Like a conjuring trick he whipped

the butcher knife into sight—the dried stain of blood on the blade plain for all to see.

"Ever see it before?" he persisted.

Big John took a slow, incredulous step forward. "That's my knife," he conceded. "I used it to slice off some beefsteaks for supper."

"Well, you'll notice that it's bloody now," Throop went on. "And mebbby you'll observe that Elwood ain't here with us. I went on back to join the rest of the boys, and he sorter stayed behind. I didn't think nothin' of that, till he didn't come back for quite a spell. Then we looked—and found him with this stickin' in his back."

A horrified, incredulous gasp went up from the others. Cynthia's face was dead white. Big John took a step backward. "It's my knife," he agreed hoarsely. "But I never done nothin' like that."

Throop shrugged. "I reckon likely you're tellin' the truth," he agreed, and spat. "You don't strike me as bein' the kind to bootcher nothin' worse'n a cow. And anyway, it was Owen here that owns and wore that coat, Owen we was accusin' of the murder. And I looked back, as I was headin' out of here earlier, and saw him followin' us. I should a watched him closer!"

Owen felt cold. Here was something far more monstrous than anything he had suspected, and the full implications of it were not yet entirely clear. And he *had* taken a short walk, after the two of them had left, to make sure that there was no trickery. Everyone knew that.

But again, and this time to his surprise, Cynthia came promptly to his rescue. "You don't need to think that he did it," she said. "For when he took that walk, I followed him, and kept my eye on him every minute! I smelled treachery, somewhere, and I wasn't sure that a try wouldn't be made to kill him. He never did a thing, and certainly he knifed no man in the back!"

Owen looked at her gratefully, wondering how he could ever have been opposed to having her along on this journey. It looked now as though he would owe his life to her. Certainly

he had underestimated her.

Throop was a little taken aback. He had more than implied, earlier in the evening, that she might lie to save Owen. But he dared not suggest that to this now thoroughly stirred up crew of cattlemen. And as Trane had suggested, there were other ways of handling things.

"That so?" he asked. "You couldn't a been mistook, I suppose, in the dark? Well—we know that Elwood was murdered, knifed in the back, by this knife that you admit is from this camp. We aim to find out the truth and see that justice is done, like we was ordered to do in the first place. It'll be a lot better for the rest of you, in the long run, if you give up this killer now, so we can take him back for the Prophet to judge!"

"He'd be lucky to get as far back on the trail as Elwood did," the Major snapped, and his implication was only too clear. "There's a mighty bad smell hereabouts, and it always gets strongest when ye're about, Throop. Justice! Wurra, what a word for you to use!"

"The same thing runs in my mind," Owen said flatly. "We haven't been looking for trouble, but if that's what you fellows want, you can have all you can chew on. If you don't want it, get out!"

"Oh, we'll go," Throop agreed. "This time. But this ain't the endin'—only the beginnin'. And if the rest of you keep on backin' up a killer, tryin' to stop justice, then it makes you all as bad guilty as he is!"

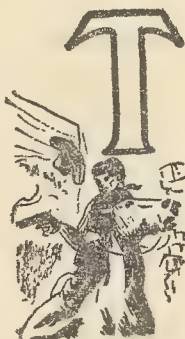
He led his men away, going with a good grace under the circumstances. And with the knowledge that they were committed to this thing now, and to his leadership.

Somewhere a coyote howled to the moon. It was answered from a different quarter by another call, then a third, infinitely lonely and savage. Trane, beside Throop, cocked his head. A lopsided grin slid across his face.

"Two-laigged coyote," he said. "And red-skinned, I reckon. Ain't often a chance like this turns up!"

11

Utes



HEY WERE in for trouble. Owen knew it, but there was nothing to do but go ahead. Morning found them on their way. Today would probably be easy, and relatively safe. Only a fool would choose to bother them here, when the opportunities ahead were so much better. Knowing what lay ahead, Owen could almost guess the spot where trouble would be unleashed.

Despite the threat of it, he was in a cheerful mood. He could almost look with a kindly eye upon the blunderings of Hank, for Hank had discovered Cynthia Shea, and it was through that that Jess had met her. Twice now Cynthia had stood up for him, never doubting; valiant as a lioness. The thought of her was very pleasant.

Riding as easily as any cowboy, mounted on the Major's pinto, which was a gentle horse, she jogged up to join him now. Her hand made a wide encompassing gesture.

"I'm sorry that I got you into this," she said soberly. "It's worse than I had supposed it could be, in so many ways."

"And I was just thinking that I was glad to be in on it," Owen retorted. "I've learned something on this trip that I never rightly guessed at, before."

"What is that?"

"How wonderful," he said. "A woman can be."

Color, softly pink, crept up her throat and ran through her cheeks. Her eyes studied her saddle-horn.

"Surely your mother should have taught you that," she murmured.

"I scarcely knew my mother," Owen explained. "She died when Hank was

born—and I was only a little shaver then.”

“Oh.” Her eyes lifted quickly, full of sympathy. “You have missed a lot, haven’t you?”

“That’s why I’m glad I’m along on this trip—now,” Owen nodded. “It’s more than worth the rest.”

What had gone before, in the way of canyons, was as nothing to Fremont’s Canyon when it arose ahead of them. That fiddle-footed continent wanderer had gone this way a few short years earlier, and this canyon was an apt monument to the memory of his passing.

The walls narrowed here, the rocks arose yellow and inhospitable, and down between the gorges the Humboldt poured its way. Owen surveyed it dubiously. Such wagons as were on the road now were, almost without exception, choosing a longer route over the hills to the right, not caring to trust themselves and their possessions to the dark recesses of the canyon and the uncertain mercies of the river.

The detour was known as the Greenhorn’s cut-off, and Owen knew that, instead of shortening the distance, it would add weary miles. Wagons had gone through the canyon before. It was shorter, cooler, with plenty of water—and right now the river was not too high. On the other hand, once in, there could be no turning back. And if enemies chose to attack, it was like a box-trap.

“What do you think of it?” he asked the Major, who was fondling his mustache in an absorbed silence.

“Sure, Jess, and ’t is loike askin’ me would I prefer tae or coffee, whin there’s only alkali water to drink,” the Major sighed. “Either way, you take what you get, and know the other would have been the better.”

“We’ll go through,” Owen decided, and gave the word to push the herd in. They went easily enough, bawling a little uneasily as the high walls closed around them and the shadows came down, but grateful for the water, for the splashing coolness of it. Here was shadowy half-darkness, as they crossed and re-crossed the flattened stream. The water was seldom

too deep, though the fords were rough, and the drivers of the wagons were hard put to it to keep from upsetting.

But, after the blistering, shadeless heat of the desert, it was a pleasant place. Until, with perhaps half the distance through the canyon covered, a steer bawled hoarsely, and Owen looked toward the sound, and saw an arrow, quivering in its thigh.

That arrow, he knew, had not been meant for the steer, but had missed the man who rode nearby by not more than inches. As though it had been a signal, other arrows began to waft down from the uncertain heights above them, a smooth-bore coughed hoarsely, setting the echoes shouting.

OWEN GLIMPSED a face and half an arm, dark copper against the glint of sun on rocks higher above, where a warrior crouched on a shadowy path and fitted a fresh arrow to his bow. It was a poor target, but Owen jerked the six-shooter to which he had fallen grim heir, snapped a quick shot. He saw the Indian dodge back as lead flattened on the cliff almost beside his face, startled for a moment. Then, secure in the knowledge that guns fired but once, confident that he could take his time now, he leaned out a little farther, exposing all the upper half of him, deliberately aiming for Owen down below.

Owen squeezed the trigger again, and he could see the almost comical expression of bewilderment and dismay which went across the warrior’s face. He seemed to lose his balance, and the bow and arrow dropped from his relaxing hands. They were an instant ahead of him in falling, and then he too came tumbling, plunging suddenly out from the light above, plummeting in deeper shadows, to strike across the rump of a cow and bounce again, sending her plunging ahead, bawling wildly.

Something close to terror had swept through the canyon, like a dark current of air, as the arrows began to rain at them. It was a thing to test the nerve of the strongest, but more of a potential than an actual

threat. Few of the warriors, crawling on the heights above them, could find good places from which to shoot, or drive their arrows accurately at that distance. And, down below here, as Owen knew, they were so deep in shadow that they must be uncertain of view at best.

The fall of the one Indian had a good effect on the nerves of the crew. It reassured them, had a steadying effect. Two or three glimpsed targets and snapped back quick shots, which helped to teach caution to their tormentors. No one had been hurt.

"Keep pushing," Owen ordered. "It's our best chance."

His worry centered chiefly about the wagons. The white canvas, stained as it was, showed more vividly here in the depths, and would be picked out for special attack. Otherwise, though there was always the risk of a hit, there was not too much danger. Owen knew Indians. They liked heavy odds in their own favor when they attacked, and that was no reflection upon their courage. It was simply their way of fighting, plain good sense as they saw it, to harass an enemy, with as little risk to themselves as was possible.

These were Utes. To pester the whites who passed unwanted through their territory was a regular business with them. But once the cowboys could get at them, to fight on more even terms, the reds would probably draw off and call it a day. Though they were squalling in high indignation about the buck he had dropped.

One of the crew caught up with the wounded cow and jerked the arrow from her rump. Other arrows kept coming, but they were scattered, the owners of the bows having learned caution. At least, there were no warriors down here in the canyon with them.

Now a boulder came hurtling, striking on a rocky shelf, rebounding. This was a thing of terror, far worse than the arrows. A few others followed, then slowed again. Owen dropped back, closer to the wagons.

I should have taken the cut-off, he thought bitterly. They'd never have attacked, out in the open. And if any-

thing happens to Cynthia—

A HORSE squealed with pain and fright. An arrow was in its shoulder, and it plunged, pitching and kicking. One of the team on the chuck wagon. Big John, feet braced, steadied it, spoke soothingly to the others. A sudden flurry of arrows came at him, where he offered a good target. They made little tearing, popping noises in the stretched canvas.

Owen raised his revolver and threw three quick shots. He scored no hits, but the rain of arrows slackened sharply, the rocks as well. A gun which kept on shooting was something new to these tribesmen, and it made them nervous. Here was a new sort of dark magic.

They had kept going quite a while now. Most of the crew, nervous at first, were getting accustomed to it, even growing a little careless, exchanging jokes back and forth. A smooth-bore thundered again, and one of the riders clutched at his arm.

It was not a bad hit, only a flesh wound, just above the elbow. Owen tied it up. But now they were coming to where the canyon widened a little—where they must soon leave its shelter. And there was plenty of cover for the Utes to fight from still, even while they offered tempting targets.

"There's just one thing to do," Owen said, with most of the crew grouped about him. "We've got to fight our way out of here—and give them a lesson while we're about it, one that they'll remember a spell. We'll leave the herd to look after itself for a while. Keep to cover as you move. Major, you and one other man stay with the wagons, just in case."

Now it was a case of the hunted becoming the hunters. Leaving their horses, they were going on foot, climbing among the rocks, gradually working up toward the rimrocks, in a game where a mistake could be the last one that a man would ever make. They had one advantage—guns against arrows. For, except for an ancient smoothbore or so, this party of Utes seemed only to have arrows, or stones to roll down at them.

But the Indians possessed one other and usual advantage. They outnumbered the white men by at least ten to one. And the death of that one warrior had angered them, so that now they were out for vengeance.

It was precarious climbing here, even under ordinary conditions. Most of these canyon walls arose almost straight up, with not too many broken places or ledges to aid in climbing. A mis-step or a slip could send a man sliding and plunging, sometimes for dizzy distances.

OWEN HAD been working his own way up with fairly good luck for a while. But now, above and beyond him, there seemed to be only blank rock, like an inverted bowl. He hesitated, and an arrow splintered on the rock close beside his hand.

He took a quick look, and saw where it came from, as a second followed it. The range, from across the canyon, was a little long for good shooting, but he was like a fly on a wall here, a tempting target, and now two or three warriors had seen him. To go back was as risky as to go ahead, to remain where he was, out of the question. And he had no target to shoot back at.

The next ten feet would require clinging with both hands and feet, almost creeping along. Owen's flesh shrank at the imminence of being a pin-cushion, but he had to do it. He moved, and not one but three arrows thudded—one just above his head, one on each side. His nerves seemed to jump and scream, and it took all his effort of will not to make a wildly false move.

Then he saw a chance. A hand-hold, up above. He drew himself up fast, knowing that the position above might prove to be even less tenable, since he'd had no chance to reconnoiter it.

But here was a little open ledge, a yard in width. He stood up swiftly, and jerked his gun and fired across the gorge, and one of the bowmen was caught by surprise, with no chance to draw back. He turned and twisted, there on the brink, clutching at nothingness, and then took a wild step forward, vanishing in the depths below.

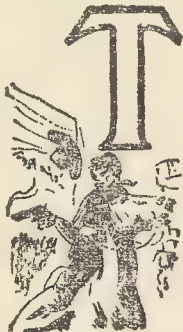
Owen followed his path.

Other guns were popping now, as the cowboys stubbornly pressed the attack. Guns, their echoes and the yells of men, made a wild melee, with the nervous bawling of the herd rising up from the depths in a grim undertone.

Now, though Owen had found a fairly sheltered spot, it was being peppered with arrows again, so much so that he could neither advance nor get a chance to shoot back. And that seemed to be a pattern of what was happening all along the line. Superior numbers were beginning to tell. It wouldn't take much to swing the attack back against them now, an attack which might wipe them out of it once gathered momentum.

12

The Major Climbs



HIS was a game of cat and mouse not at all to the Major's liking. It was highly risky to go ahead with the wagons, yet out of the question to remain long in one place. That rain of rocks always picked them out and thickened if they tarried long. The herd were straggled out for a long way ahead, looking after themselves now.

A boulder, a quarter of a ton of it, rolled and thudded down from high above. It missed the wagon by inches, struck in a couple of feet of water, and showered them all—McCord, Cynthia and Mammy Green. The horses snorted and plunged. That stone had seemed big as a house—and it was a lot bigger than the others had been.

"Guess we'd better move," the Major nodded, and cursed under his breath, because there was no target to shoot back at, nothing that you could see up above. Another boulder plunged, but not quite so close. It was mostly guesswork on both sides, this kind of fighting, but that one

had been too close for comfort.

They dropped into deeper water; the wheels ground on rocky bottom, then they were around a bend, and the Major blinked and looked again to be sure that his eyes were not playing tricks on him.

The chuck wagon was behind. This up ahead, looking so much like it, was an emigrant wagon—or another emigrant wagon, he supposed, since that was what they were as well. Someone on the seat, with a blue sunbonnet, looked their way and waved a hand in greeting. A nimble little lady who held a musket in one hand and clutched the reins with the other.

"If I could just see something to shoot back at!" she sighed, as though this was any casual exchange of the time of day. "I've tried three times now to get beyond here. Out there they can just rain rocks down—and don't they know it! Almost got us twice. Back in here they can't bounce them so close. Guess there's a ledge up above that kind of turns them off."

The fresh array of stone which had been cast down bore out her words. The wagon and its vicinity were sheltered, but the stream bed and the edges beyond were liberally studded with new rock. One dead steer lay off there, where it had been hit. Nothing could be seen, up above, but the Indians were there.

Here, in this uncertain haven, introductions seemed in order. The Major performed them, to the best of his ability.

"Miss Cynthia Shea, ma'am, and Mammy. Big John, and mesilf, Major McCord. And 't would be a pleasure to see you at most any other toime and place."

"I'm pleased to know you folks, anyway. This ain't as bad as out on the plains, where they can yell and ride right up and shoot in your face. That was annoying. I'm Mandy Carlin; and this is Johnny, who's been fretting all morning that he's not well enough to fight the heathens."

She nodded to a boy of nine or ten, pulling back the flap briefly to disclose him upon a sort of pallet. His eyes were bright, but he bore all the marks of serious illness upon him.

"He's had a tussel with the plague," Mandy Carlin explained. "Struck him six weeks back. Took off his pa and ma, seems like, and he was all alone there, bad sick, when I found him. He's survived—but it's a slow job, recoverin' his strength. We're among friends, Johnny."

"I can see that, Mandy," Johnny agreed valiantly. "But I'd like to do some 'hin' about them Injuns, just the same."

"I reckon there'll be plenty Indians left for you, one of these days," Mandy assured him. "Don't fret on that account. These cowboys will take care of the heathens."

"We sure will, ma'am," the Major agreed gallantly.

HE STARED upward, blinking at the stronger light above, the sheen of sun which did not reach this spot, and looked again. There was a trail, or pathway—torturous and twisting, but his eye could follow it. Leading up and up, sometimes with dizzy drops below. But passable.

Passable, if he could see straight, and always he had prided himself on the sight of a hawk, clear to the top. That held possibilities. Good and bad. So far, none of the Indians appeared to have discovered it—but they might, at any time. If they did, and figured it out, they could come swarming down, get to the wagons—and they might be just wild enough to try it.

On the other hand, a man might climb up there, so long as he wasn't suspected. And, if he could once reach the top, get up above those crawling hordes, where he could look down on them and use his gun—it wouldn't take long to change the whole complexion of things. Indians wouldn't linger long in the face of such fire.

The Major sighed, raveling the end of a suddenly droopy mustache. It looked like it was up to him.

It wasn't the possibility of the Indians who might sight him along the way which worried the Major. They were there, and bad, but he knew them. Worse, he knew himself. The eye of a hawk he might have, but there resemblance to that bird ended. He liked level ground, or a good wide

trail. A place like this one showed to be, narrow, dizzy, had never been for him. Sighing, he slid out of the saddle, nodding to Cynthia. And ducked out of sight and began to climb.

It wasn't bad at first; he knew better than to look back or down. Though, half-way up, staring at the sheer face of rock rising above him, seeing only a shelf barely wide enough to edge along on, for the next dozen steps or so, he held his face to the wall and felt that he was going to be sick. If some Indian happened to look and see him now—

The thought hastened him along. Now the trail, while rougher, widened a bit, and he risked a look below, with something to hang on to. Out and off, toward the far side of the canyon, it wasn't bad. Off there he could have picked him off easy and sure. There was an itch in his trigger-finger, but he wasn't going to do anything to attract the attention of others—not at this point. The Major went on.

He was getting up toward the sunlight now. Here the path made a turn, and beyond that bend of the cliff was the big question mark. From down below, he'd been able to see just this far. Beyond, the path might peter out nothingness.

Here was the turn. An abrupt shoulder of rock. He reached for it, for a hand-hold, and his suddenly staring eyes saw another hand creep around it and get a hold on his side, almost touching his own as he snatched it back. A sinewy red hand.

THE MAJOR'S heart was a lump in his throat, threatening to choke him. Too big to swallow. Here was proof that there was a path the rest of the way—and someone had seen it. Had he told others about it, so that they might be swarming along behind him? In any case, it wasn't an ideal spot for trouble.

There was the gun in his holster, but the Major hated to use it at this juncture if he didn't have to. He stared a moment, nerving himself. Then his own fingers closed on that wrist, and he jerked and twisted.

A wild yell of surprise and terror

split the air. He let go, and saw the warrior going, spread-eagled as he came into sight, plummeting down.

Just one quick twist and jerk. Never had he won an easier fight. But now he had to stop around that corner in his own turn, and do it quick. The Major shut his eyes again. He hesitated a moment, and it took a physical effort to pry them open again. Then he took the step.

It was barely a foothold, here. His heart was back in his mouth, and though he was sweating, there was a cold chill up and down his spine, particularly in his feet. He paused for a moment, with little blankness under him, yet an awful lot of that. Then the ledge widened again, like the promise of things to come, good things.

He let the breath out of his lungs and took a quick step to that solid footing, and went on, climbing fast. It was running in his mind that somebody would be looking this way, and astonishment might hold them dumb for a moment or two. After that, they'd think what a fine target he was.

It was twenty feet to the crest, and he had just reached it as two arrows came feathering at him. One stuck itself in his sleeve, and hung there as he scrambled. Those which would have followed would have been deadly.

But he was on top at last. Up where the sun struck him, and where he could look down, the way he'd figured. As a hawk would look—or an eagle.

The view spread out below him was grandly impressive, with the dark down below, bathed in a shimmering half-light which gave place to deeper gloom. And with more canyons and hills off in the distance, from the opposite way.

Also, much closer at hand, he could see half a hundred Indians, something like rattlers sunning themselves on the rocks, moving or crouching in various spots, all looking down, creeping closer to get at those they hunted.

Here was a jumble of rocks, good enough shelter. Half a hundred war-

riors were a mild risk as compared to that trail he'd climbed. The Major felt his mustaches quiver and rise, like the hackles of a dog. He selected a target and let him have it.

13

Rifles At The River



It hadn't lasted long, once the Major attained his vantage point, not long enough for him to make the most of his hardwon position. As soon as the Utes discovered that they were outflanked, they had lost no time in getting out of there.

Which, when you viewed it sensibly, was the thing to do; they believed in living to pester another day.

And there was one nice thing about it, once the herd and the wagons had worked their way through. Mrs. Carlin, as it seemed she was, or Mandy as she preferred to be called, had snapping brown eyes and a quick, bright way about her, like a wren. She had made some sort of an arrangement with Cynthia to travel right along with them. And when the Major showed up, she threw her arms about his neck and gave him an impulsive kiss.

"You saved the lives of every one of us this day!" she declared. "And don't think that we aren't thankful!"

"Sure, and it looks as if we all have much to be thankful for," the Major said piously, and twisted both spikes of his mustache.

There was only a few miles ahead of them before they would have to take another day-long detour away from the river, Owen knew. Where it entered a canyon impassable to wagons or horses alike. But, after what had just happened, he was as well satisfied with the detour.

"All that I'm thankful for, is that

the Mormons didn't show up to help the Utes," the Major sighed. "Considerin' who's leadin' 'em, begorra, and I wouldn't put such things past them."

"They might like to do it, but I doubt if the Utes could be counted on to cooperate very well," Owen said. "They'll be giving us more of their attention before long, I imagine."

The trail here wound through the hills, and the dust from two thousand pairs of hoofs arose like a solid fog. A fog which might be cut with a knife, but could scarcely be breathed. After the cool wetness of the canyon, it was torment.

"But we'll be back to the river by night," the Major nodded. "Also, from the looks uv things, I'd say 't would rain before then."

Owen had been studying the skies as well. The sun had gone out, blotted away by clouds which, when they could be seen through the dust, hung close and gray. There was all the look of a heavy storm on the way.

"When we reach the river, we'll have to cross before we camp," he said. "If it rains, it might be impassable by morning."

"And we may find some of our fri'nds waitin' to welcome us on the other side, is that it?" the Major nodded.

"That's what I'm afraid of. It's a likely place for it."

But the river was not their immediate problem. The dust was a torment. Here it had a peculiarly heavy quality of its own, which seemed to reach into throat and lungs far worse than most dust. Rain would be a welcome relief from it, but rain was not yet coming. The wagons pulled to the side and halted, seeking respite, and Mandy stirred herself to aid in repacking a few things in Cynthia's wagon, where they had slipped and slid as the wagon nearly tipped over.

She shook out a folded object which had been collecting dust for days, until now it was so caked that there was a little doubt as to what it

might be, until she held it up before her.

"Sakes alive," she exclaimed. "A man's overcoat. And what a odd design.. Kind of pretty, at—"

THE WORDS ended in a scream, followed a moment later by the distant whoom of a heavy rifle. Mandy had dropped the coat, and was staring, white of face, not quite understanding. With shaking hands she reached up and took her starched sunbonnet, and through the crown of it, plain to see, was the double hole of a bullet.

"I thought I felt somethin' hit me," she gasped. "Just like someone was tryin' to jerk the bonnet right off my head. Now what on earth—"

Owen and the Major had just been riding up to the wagons. Now, with out a word, Owen swung his horse and spurred in the direction from which the gun had thundered. But the Major tarried a moment.

"Reckon somebody got a look at that coat, through the dust, an' figured it was Jess in it," he growled. "Thought they was shootin' at him. That's a bad thing to fool with, that coat—but don't you fret yourself ma'am. It wasn't you they was aimin' for."

Inclination and duty battled, his inclination was to tarry and comfort her, but duty called, and he whirled his own horse and followed Owen. Duty could be very much of a nuisance at times.

They hunted for the better part of an hour, without result. The combination of dust and hills in which a man could hide and ride away was too much to work against. But the Major was outspoken this time. "Sure, Jess," he counseled. "'T is a dangerous thing, and no doubt about it."

"It's not the coat they're after," Owen argued. "It's me. And that's a good coat."

"True, on both counts. But we're in Nevada country now, and headin' for the land av eternal summer. What good will such a coat do ye in Cal-

ifornia, anyway—providin' ye ever reach it alive?"

"I think I'll hang on to the coat a spell longer, anyway," Owen said. "I like that coat."

"No doubt 't will serve to bury ye in, at this rate," the Major sighed gloomily. "And I can think av worse uses for it—but not aisily."

It was, Owen supposed, probably Dawse Throop or one of his men who had fired that shot. The thing was logical, up to a certain point. But there all logic went to pieces, when you traced back this series of tries to kill him. His mind stopped short in revolt at what that all led to.

This day's drive had certain advantages. Only a day away from the river, there was more water along the way. West of the summit over which they had toiled were springs, quickly muddled by the herd but containing good water.

They sighted the river again in the late afternoon, coming to the top of a hill and looking down a steep, gravelling slope to the water. Here the Humboldt swung again toward the north, and it was Owen's intention to cross back to the south bank and continue down it. This offered, on the whole, a shorter, greener route than the north bank. It was also considered to hold more hazard from the Utes, but that was not worth too much consideration, under the circumstances.

A FEW drops of rain were beginning to spatter down, big drops which made spurting plops in the dust a welcome relief from the intolerable fog of it. But it meant that getting across yet tonight was doubly necessary. A heavy rain could raise the river and trap them here for days.

Giving orders for the wagons to wait until the herd was across, Owen waved his arm. Ordinarily, it was not a bad crossing. But the Utes might add to the hazard.

For a few minutes, Owen hoped

that they might be lucky this time. The herd was taking the water without hesitation, and the leaders had reached the far end of the bank and started to climb out, with nothing happening. But then, as some of the riders neared the far shore as well, rifles broke the silence, riflemen hidden in the rocky recesses back from either side of the road.

A bullet whipped the water at Owen's feet, aimed a little low as he started to swing his horse. If he'd kept riding straight ahead, as the gunman had counted on in aiming, it would have been a hit. And now, above the crack of guns, came the high shrill howls of the attackers. The Major, not far away, snorted disgustedly.

"Injuns!" he grunted. "Injuns, me grandmither's cow! With white skin, under the paint they may be wearin'!"

That had been Owen's instant decision as well. The fact that rifles were being used here, instead of bows and arrows, had argued against these being Utes, who seemed to be short on guns. And while the yells were wild and savage enough, they did not have quite the unearthly chill of the war-whoop gobbling from the throat of a real Indian.

Which was not reassuring. At this juncture, Owen would have preferred real Indians with bows, to white renegades with rifles. These must be men from Salt Lake, led by Throop. And trying to disguise their attack in this manner.

Some of the cattle were beginning to mill, alarmed by the shooting. And some of the bullets were coming close. A horse went down, throwing its rider into the thick of the turmoil. Another man swung in, despite a sharp hail of lead, tossed him a rope, and pulled him from imminent danger of being swept under the vortex of the trampling herd.

The worst of it was that there was no shelter out here, no targets at which to fire in return. The renegades were keeping well to cover, and Owen saw that this could mean disaster,

unless they could get a foothold on the shore over there and smoke them out. But to get a foothold was the problem. A dozen men, posted as Throop's were, could wipe them out as they came—and apparently they intended to do just that.

He felt the sharp hot sting of a bullet along his own shoulder, breaking the skin, sending a gush of blood. Just a small wound, which, a few scant inches to the side, might have finished him instead. Another man was wounded too, not far from him. Owen could see one arm hanging limp, blood streaming down it, while the cowboy doggedly strove to work a gun and control his horse with his good hand.

A cow bawled wildly, and went to her knees, then crashed heavily sideways, almost against his horse. That bullet had been aimed for him as well, but dusk was beginning to spread a haze across the river, the rain made a mist upon the water—deceptive, yet not sufficient shelter.

Most of their efforts, out here, had to be to keep the herd from getting hopelessly tangled in the confusion. That left little chance for anything else. Maybe they could work on across with the herd, as the dark drew down. But even as he considered it, Owen knew that it wouldn't be work. The real night was still too far off. This would be decided, one way or another, before that.

And they couldn't get across by daylight—nor could they hold out till the dark. The renegades were beginning to get the range. One of his crew was dead—rising half out of his saddle, slipping, sliding, and gone in the hungry river. The rain was beginning to come down harder now, but still not enough to screen them.

Then, as though that was not enough, there arose a fresh chorus of yells and shots from the shore—as though the whooping was being taken up by a hundred fresh throats, a new multitude of men swarming to the attack.

14

The Black Night



FROM THE sound, this was a fresh horde of fighting men, sweeping out of the covets of mountain and storm, swarming to the attack. And now a few horsemen did appear, and there was a wild peppery outburst of the rifles.

But Owen saw, with increasing amazement, that this attack was not directed against them. No more bullets were coming their way, disturbing the troubled river, though the fight seemed hotter than ever. And then he understood.

These were real Indians, this time—Utes, probably, pouncing on the rear of the others. Their attack had come as a complete surprise to the renegades, and under it, faced now by foes from front and rear alike, Dawse Throop's crew had no stomach to stay and take it. They were already in retreat, drawing off as quickly as possible, back into the same hovering hills, the crowding dusk, covering their withdrawal with their guns. For the Utes had few weapons beyond bows and arrows.

One man was outlined for a moment on horseback, there on the shore, and though his face was streaked and daubed with paint, Owen stiffened at sight of him. This man was no Mormon, though he was a renegade. And now the thing which he had hated to think about, all along, was only too clear. For the man was Greer Curran.

It was Curran, then, who had been behind all this trouble from the start. He had been hiring these others, setting them on the trail. Curran wanted him dead.

Viewed in that light, the whole

stark pattern of the past weeks made sense. The killing of the outlaw who had first robbed them and was wearing his coat, for Curran had talked with Hank, and so had known that he had the Major would be along.

This was help from an unexpected source, this attack of the Utes upon the white renegades. To them, finding one bunch of enemies engaging another, it had seemed a good opportunity, and they had taken advantage of it.

But it was scarcely respite. Curran's crew had been driven away, but the Utes had come here with a purpose in mind. They had lost men to these trail drivers, and they wanted vengeance. Likewise, they would enjoy butchering some of the cattle at leisure, and now they were taking the positions vacated by the others, intent on getting on with the same job.

If any of the cattlemen had cherished hopes that, though attacked by the Utes, the other white men would turn, in such an extremity, and fight with them, that slim flicker had gone out now like a candle in the wind. If the Utes could do the job for them, Dawse Throop, Greer Curran and Trane were more than ready to let them get on with it. Then they could strike in turn.

Arrows at close range, could be as bad as bullets.

BUT OWEN knew that they had to keep on moving across. That was one thing, with the Utes. If you get too close and made it too hot for them, they'd pull out again—just as the others had done, though for somewhat different reasons. Owen swung his horse straight for the misty shore, and spurred. The others were grouped at his heels. The herd, for a while, must take care of itself.

The Indians had gotten one white man in that surprise attack. A man who lay on a little knoll, not far back from the water, his face bedaubed in Indian style, but the back of his neck showing curiously white where

it was grotesquely twisted. The Utes had surprised him, and had made a pincushion of him. His scalp had been newly ripped away.

As Owen's horse reached the shore it tried to shy, and he had a quick look, and felt a little sick again, even though this man had been an enemy. He had seen him before. Trane.

Now it was hot, close work. Taking advantage of the storm and enshrouding dusk, the Utes were swarming at them, emboldened by the success they had just attained. Owen saw a face before him, heard a bow-string twang, the sound a different zing with the weapon wet. He shot, and saw the warrior go down. But another swarmed into the place like the ghost of the dead man rising up, and this one had a tomahawk in his clutch.

Owen's gun was empty, but he spurred his horse on, chopping down, warding off the stroke of the war-axe, feeling the long barrel of his revolver crunch into the face, driving it back and down....

And then all at once it was over with. They would not stand against guns, against determined fighting men at such close quarters. Not because it was cowardice to draw off, but because that was good sense when they saw that they had failed. The silence, after the shouting tumult, was almost a tangible thing. The hoofs of the cattle, coming up out of the river, were sucking sounds in the mud, a rattle of clashing horns. The rain was like a wet sheet dropped over them.

One of his crew was dead, lost somewhere in the river. Faring better in death than many who had come before him or many another who would follow after, in this wild year of forty-nine or its wilder companion of fifty. To die with cool water all about you was not too bad. Far better than to fall in the desert with swollen tongue and parching throat for lack of that same water, to lie where buzzards circled or wolves grew bold by night.

Two men were wounded, not too seriously. And the herd was across,

still virtually intact. Better luck than he had hoped for. *I don't deserve it, thought Owen. But she does. Nothing is too good for her.*

THE WAGONS drew up out of the water, and though there was always the chance that the Utes, being Indians and therefore unpredictable, might return, there was no choice save to camp here and wait. Already the dark was close about them, a wet, almost tangible thing. Bringing a measure of protection of its own.

Owen sucked in a long breath of relief that it was no worse, and stopped in the glimmer of light as Big John, always a genius at that sort of thing, coaxed a fire to blazing, the rain drops hissing in the flames, trying to drive them down, as though infuriated that the dark should be turned back, even a little way. Light, and there would be supper cooking, and the stained canvas of the three wagons, drawn up here, showed dim and monstrous, like elephants in the gloom.

"Where's Cynthia?" Owen asked, for there was Mammy Greeb, preparing to assist Big John, and Mandy had joined them, while the voice of the boy, eager with excitement, came from the wagon. These were here, but not Cynthia. And a feeling of unease grew in him.

"Cynthy?" Mandy looked about, surprised. "Ain't she with you? She grabbed a gun an' a cayuse and took out, when the fight got heavy. I thought she was with you."

Mammy Green's face showed swift apprehension.

"I thought I heard a screech, sort of," she said, as though not liking to utter the words. "Lak mebbly she scream. I thought it was an Indian—but if'n she ain' here—"

No one, it developed, had seen her. Nor was she coming to join them at the firelight, though its beacon would be wide-seen. The rain was heavier, with a new raw coldness running through it, the dark night suddenly twice as unfriendly. Cynthia had

come to try and help him, once again—and now she was gone. The lump in Owen's throat was an icy thing, a twin lump like lead in his stomach, contracting it, as though a hand twisted there.

It would not have been too difficult, in the confusion and the closing night, for Curran or one of his men to ride where she rode, and grab her. That would account for the screams, choked off short. And then would be sure that what he wanted he had taken....

The rest of the crew were inclined to agree with him, that such was the thing most likely to have happened.

"He's a black-hearted rogue, if iver there was one—and there's a many of them hereabouts," the Major grated. "And 't would have to be a black night av storm, at such a toime—"

The same thought was in the minds of all of them, Owen knew. They were outraged at this thing, anxious to ride to the rescue, to help her, to inflict vengeance on those who would dare such a thing. Yet how could it be done?

"The rest of you stay here," he ordered. "Too many of us on the hunt would do no good—and there's risk enough here. But I'm startin' out, now."

"'T is a black night to ride in," the Major said.

"A black night, yes—but maybe I'll be lucky."

precisely once more, showed him. And it was all that he could do, as well as the least that he might do—to play this hunch.

Curran and his renegade crew had had a plan—the attack, here at the ford, in the guise of Indians. Not a bad plan, which might well have succeeded had not the Utes spoiled it. After that, if things were as he feared, Curran had kidnapped Cynthia, taking advantage of the dark as it came down across the wild river, and the confusion.

That was not a part of the original plan, of course, but action on the spur of the moment. But, having her, there would have to be a plan of sorts. It would never do for them either, to ride blindly on such a night as this, and under such circumstances.

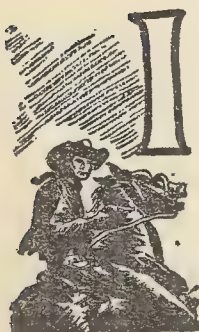
Had they been left alone, and able to hold their position here by the river, that would have solved the problem of the night camp. Driven out of it, they must make a fresh rendezvous elsewhere. And there were plenty of hiding places in all these hills.

That was a chance which Owen had to take. All that he had to go on now was his notion of what he would do in similiar case. To scatter your forces in the night and head for some unknown spot in strange and hostile territory was to run the risk of destruction. So it followed that, with one set of plans upset, the logical thing would be to name a known meeting place as the group of them scattered—somewhere *back* across the river, along the way they had come.

He had traveled, he guessed, an hour and more beyond the river, and was soaked and cold, and beginning to know a sharp fear that he had been wrong, or had at least missed what he must find, when his nose brought him the odor of wood smoke. Mesquite, he guessed, though there was no sure way of knowing, but there was a difference in smokes as in the quality of flame which various woods gave off. It was elusive, just a wisp, and gone again in the wetness. He pulled up, wary, and then, reali-

15

Masks Off



IT WAS not luck which he had in mind, however, but a hunch. If that was wrong, then he knew that it would be a black night indeed, and a black day following. But there was a certain logic to the thing, as his mind, now working coldly,

zing that his cayuse was climbing again, let it go, until it reached a crest. And there he saw it.

It was only a faint gleam, reflected and gone again, off somewhere at the side. But the light of a fire, for here it could be nothing else.

Presently he left his horse, tying it to a small tree which he could feel but could not see. Now he was in a gulch, a small wooded arroyo, and the light came from further along it. The sound of voices reached his ears next, and then he rounded a boulder which stood sentinel-like in the bottom of the ravine, close-bordered by brush, and beyond was a sort of cavern, made by the overhang of a ledge at one side, and with the walls of the gulch and the brush to shut away most of the firegleam. As apt a place as might be found on such a night as this.

It was only a small fire, used doubtly for cooking and that men might help to dry themselves, and its circle of light was small, pushed back by the jealous dark. The odor of coffee came from a blackened pot set among the coals, and one man was cooking as well as he might with scant equipment and apparently not much more of experience. Half a dozen other men clustered close, watchfully hungry.

Beyond the full night was a half-dusk, in which he could see a little. Now Owen counted them, as others came with more wood. Back where Eliphalet Elwood had died there had been thirteen—but one other had died today, and one had made himself an open addition to their ranks, so the number should remain the same. He counted twelve, and recognized some of the faces among them, Throop there by the fire, all of them with ugly daubs of paint upon their faces, streaked by the rain, and another sort of stain to color their skin darker likewise partly washed off now.

Sober men, in this hour of reflection, the aftermath to a thing of which they were a little ashamed. Wondering why they had been led to do this thing, thinking of home, now so far away, of death on the trail. Long thoughts, and somber.

SEVERAL of them were beginning to eat, sullenly, wolfing the food. Three or four of them seemed to have taken wounds in the fighting, and one man had a bandaged arm which hung limp at his side. But there was no sign of Curran, nor of Cynthia.

But now again Owen caught the murmur of voices, back a little way, and one of those was Curran. He worked his way closer, and relief and anger were a mingling wave in him. Back where the overhang afforded shelter, Cynthia sat, dim-seen in the gloom, back propped against the rocky wall, legs stretched before her. And her ankles, as Owen made out now in that rising anger, were tightly tied together.

Curran was talking to her, offering her a tin plate full of food, which she was angrily refusing.

"I'd sooner starve!" she flared. "I want nothing from you!"

"Whether you like me or not, you better eat it," Curran urged. "You'll be hungry 'fore there's another chance."

Abruptly she changed her mind and accepted the plate, commenced to eat hungrily. Her sunbonnet was gone, and even in the dusk the vital beauty of her was manifest. Curran, squatting down close at hand, helped himself from another plate, and there was amusement in his voice.

"That's fine," he said. "You're not fooling me none, girl. I know what's in your mind—to keep your strength up, in case you get a chance to escape. I like to see you eat, but there'll be no chance to get away."

Cynthia paused for a moment to look at him. But she made no answer. Curran's voice became persuasive.

"I wish you'd be sensible, girl," he said. "There's no reason why we shouldn't be friends. That's what I want most."

"You act like it," she said bitterly.

"Don't get me wrong," he protested. "Sure I had to grab you and fetch you here—but there's just one reason why I did it. Because I've fallen, head over heels, in love with you. You're the first woman that's ever meant anything to me. And I made up mind

back in Salt Lake, that I was going to have you. It would be a lot nicer, specially for you, right now, if you'd be reasonable. I'd like nothing better than to untie you."

"Go right ahead," Cynthia agreed.

"I will. Just as soon as you agree not to try and skip out, the first chance you get."

Again she made no reply, and he went on.

"As I say, I fell for you, back when I first saw you. Why can't you treat me like you do other folks, girl? As well as you do my cousins, for instance?"

"Treat you like a white man, you mean, when you act like a red Indian—only worse?" Cynthia demanded scathingly. "You've set that bunch—" she gestured contemptuously toward the others. "After us. You've tried to murder Jess Owen, and it runs in my mind that you brought about the death of Hank. And they your cousins, as you say!"

Anger flared darkly in Curran's face, and he leaned a little forward. "Careful how you talk, girl!" he warned. "Sounds to me like you need a little tamin'!"

"Talk?" Cynthia flashed. "Do you dare deny any of it?"

"All right, then, if you want it that way," Curran growled, and threw aside the mask which he had worn in her presence, up to then. "I did have Hank Owen killed—just so that I could get you! You wouldn't look at me otherwise! And you'd ought to know by now that I won't let anything stand in my way!"

OWEN could see, now, that Curran had been drinking—a thing which he rarely did, but had probably indulged in to warm himself because of the storm. The liquor was unleashing his tongue, bringing out the worst in him.

"Now you know how it is," Curran went on savagely. "And so we can talk turkey. I got you right where I want you, and you'd better make up your mind mighty fast to be nice to me. I did fall for you—and I still like you, even if you have been makin' a fool of yourself. But one thing

that I liked about you was that herd of cattle. I aim to have them—and when they're sold in California, the money will go in my pockets! There ain't nothin' to stop me taking them over when I get ready!"

Never had Owen heard such bitter anger in him, or seen him lose control of himself. Seldom did Greer Curran ever lose his temper, and this, of course, was the effect of the liquor. It showed the depth of passion in him that he would run on this way, even now, as well as his own certainty of power.

"I'm still willing to do the right thing by you—and marry you," Curran said bluntly. "But don't get the notion that I have to—or that you mean so much to me that I won't use you to get what I want!" He gestured with a thumb toward the fire.

"You know Dawse Throop, there—who's done a lot of killin', includin' stickin' a knife in the ribs of his partner, the other night. Dawse is a Mormon—the kind that likes that part where a man can have as many wives as he wants. He's got two or three already, but I can buy him for any job I've got left to do, by just turning you over to him for wife number three, or whatever number it is. Would you like that, better than marryin' me?"

"You—you wouldn't!" she gasped.

For answer, Curran fumbled in a pocket, brought out a half-empty bottle, and drank the rest of it. He tossed it away, and the glass shattered against a stone.

"Wouldn't I?" he laughed. "You bet I would—and will, mighty quick, if I have to. I aim to have that herd, and I have to get them to California." He leaned forward, confidentially.

"I'd figgered to take over, and boss yore crew. That's out of the question, now. On'y way is to have these Saints drive 'em. And they want to head for home. But Dawse Throop 'll make 'em take the herd there if I say so! And if I pay him what he wants! Once there, there's other women in California—and with money, a man can make plenty more! That's what I'm after. If you marry me, yore crew will take my orders about the herd.

So you got a choice. And you'll have to make it quick!"

16

Flood



CURRAN was drunk. He was also supreme in his own conceit. Always he had been that way, very sure of himself and of his own charms. Probably it did not even occur to him that there could be a question of choice, when he put it that way.

Certainly he did not intend that there should really be a choice.

But even as he spoke the range of the thing was being narrowed, quite without his volition. Owen had worked a little nearer, calculating his chances, with the rest of the crew so close at hand. There was the dark and storm, but those hazards worked both ways. He was looking for a break, and then, tensing, he saw that it was coming from an unexpected source.

Dawse Throop had left the group by the fire, had started to join Cynthia and Curran. And then he had caught something of what Curran was saying, and had stopped back in the shadows. Listening now he stood, and a change had come over him. Suggested, Owen knew, by what he had overheard.

Jealously had been building up in Dawse Throop for a long while now, rankling bitterly when he stopped to think that he was doing this job for another man, and for base hire. True, Curran was a cold-blooded businessman when it came to such matters. He dealt in murder precisely as in any other commodity, and Throop was not far behind him in that. The pay was good for the kind of job.

But merely good pay, in this case, was not enough. Throop knew what Curran expected to get out of it, and that made his own pay seem a mere pittance. And having seen Cynthia

Shea, jealousy had grown in him.

Now, all unwittingly, Curran had suggested the solution to him. With extra pay from a part of the herd for inducement, his own men would follow him even more readily than if he was working for Curran, and there was a fortune in the herd. And to have Cynthia for a third wife—the idea, now that Curran had suggested it, was eminently simple and workable, and completely appealing to him.

Throop was a disciple of direct action. Having decided on a new course, there was, to his mind, no better time than the present for putting it into action. He could easily explain it to his own men—that the Gentile had been threatening the girl, and that would be enough for them. And by the same token, Cynthia should be grateful for his intervention now, since she was shrinking away from Curran in horror.

Dawse Throop's gun was in his hand, leveling, his finger on the trigger. Owen saw it, and he had to shoot fast.

The two guns roared as one voice. Owen's was a shade the quicker. Enough so to save Curran's life. Owen's bullet struck Dawse Throop's arm, just below the elbow. A glancing wound, superficial enough in itself, but sufficient to unsteady his aim and to scare him badly. His bullet passed so close to Curran's head in turn that he could hear the wild hum of it, and then there was confusion amounting almost to pandemonium.

It came to Throop that they were being attacked by the cattlemen, or by the Utes. In either case this arroyo in which they had taken shelter could be a trap. His thought was to get away, into the darkness. And his men, hearing the gun-fire, had similar ideas.

CURRAN was no less startled than the rest of them. A wild jump carried him back, and then he too, was trying to get somewhere else fast. It would have been comical under other circumstances.

Owen worked fast. As soon as they recovered from their fright, they

would be ugly, doubly dangerous. He reached Cynthia's side, and had her up in his arms and was back in the enfolding gloom almost before she realized what was happening. But she did not struggle nor cry out. Instead her arms crept about his neck, half in an effort to help hold herself, half in contentment.

"I knew you'd come, Jess," she whispered.

Once back in the dark he set her upon her feet again, then quickly cut the rope which bound her ankles. She staggered a little and clutched at him to steady herself.

"Can you walk?" he asked.

"If you'll help me," she agreed. "I'm a little—unsteady. But I'll manage."

They said no more, for silence now was their best guarantee of safety. Others were beginning to move about, to call cautiously to one another as they perceived that this was not what they had first figured it for. But pursuit, save by hap-hazard means, was out of the question on such a night as this.

It would be better to have an extra horse, but Owen dared not risk anything to get one of theirs. Someone in the other group would think of that, and be on hand to guard them. Also, he had no idea of where to find them. And if they both rode his own horse, there would be less danger of becoming separated in this opaque blackness.

The slope of the gulch helped, and Owen had a good sense of direction. Tonight he needed it. But presently they found his big bay again, and he took Cynthia up in front of him. Both of them were soaked to the skin, and the driving rain seemed to be increasing in fury, rather than slackening. However, there was one good thing about it, in that it came steadily out of the northwest. Owen had taken note of that. Now, remembering, it was not difficult to get straightened out and on the proper course back toward the river. With that done, he had to trust to his horse again.

"Did you ever see a wilder night?" Cynthia asked. "Or a blacker?"

"Scared?" he asked.

"Not any more," she retorted promptly. "I was—horribly, for a while there. Just exactly what did happen?"

He told her, as he had pieced it together in his mind. And felt her shiver a little. "I don't know which is worse," she said. "Curran, or Throop. Curran has a little more polish—but they're both rather terrible. And to think that I got you into this!"

Owen's arms were on either side of her, and she felt them press a little tighter for a moment. "I wouldn't have it any other way—now," he said.

"Nor I," she agreed. "Do you know, Jess, you're just what I thought you'd be."

"How do you mean?" he demanded, surprised.

"Like Hank told me," she explained. "You see, things had been pretty bad, for a while. First father, and then mother—they took sick, and— and went so fast. Father was fine at breakfast. A big, strong, hearty man—always laughing, never worried about anything. It didn't seem as if anything could bother him. But by—by noon he was dead. I think that was what killed mother—as much as anything."

She was silent a minute, while the horse's hoofs squelched in the mud, and the rain beat monotonously, dripping from Owen's hat, a thin rivulet of it running down the back of his neck. But he scarcely noticed it.

"It was about three days later, I think—I'm a little confused for what happened for a few days. But then I noticed that she was sick, too—she had been so silent, and hardly moving or speaking, after father went, that it was hard to tell. I called the doctor—there happened to be one in another tent, close by—and he said it was the plague, too."

"You poor girl," Owen whispered.

"SHE LIVED three days," Cynthia said. "I think she might have pulled through—if she had much wanted to live. As it was—well, as I say, it was pretty bad. I was still pretty depressed, and sort of

lost and helpless, when I met Hank. He cheered me up."

"He was good at that sort of thing," Owen agreed.

"Yes," she acknowledged. "He was lively, cheerful, full of fun, and so very sure of himself. Like a tonic. I was lost, and he was someone to turn to—and I felt that I could trust him. He was the first man that I'd felt that way about in a long time. I knew that he was rather wild—it didn't take long to see that. But he—he was good."

"He was," Owen said again. "You had him sized up right."

"Well, he kind of made me forget—not forget, exactly, either, but he took my mind off my troubles, and made me feel a little like living again. And he had such big ideas. Like buying this herd of cattle. He had just found where he could get the herd, before he met me, and gotten the idea—and he said that if I wanted to invest what I had, he'd take the herd and me safe through to California and see that I doubled my money at the same time. It sounded like a good idea."

"You liked Hank a lot, didn't you?"

"Yes," she acknowledge. "I did. But I was waiting for you to come along—if you know what I mean."

"Me?" Owen said, puzzled.

"It—that sounds terrible, doesn't it?" she gasped, and he knew that in the darkness her cheeks were scarlet. "What I mean is—I liked Hank. And he told me all about you—how you could do almost anything that came along, how steady and dependable you were, and—and all sorts of things. I liked Hank—but I knew that there was something missing about him. He might get it, after a while—when he was older and had more experience. But somehow he made me think of you as if you had what he lacked. So I—well, as I say, you're just like what I thought you'd be."

It was Owen's turn to be silent, amazed at this confession, and at what it implied.

IF THERE was any pursuit, he heard no sounds of it. It was un-

likely, of course, for several reasons. There was dissension and disorganization in the camp behind them, and they would not be sure who nor how many had taken part in the rescue. In this night, they couldn't do much in any case.

One thing was certain. Curran and Throop would still be against them, but now they would be against each other as well. Each intent on killing the other at the first opportunity. Such a quarrel might work to his advantage.

And now, more than ever, he was faced with the necessity for reaching California in safety, with Cynthia and her herd. If it had been a matter of duty before, it was vastly more than that now. But the hazards would grow more bitter as the miles fell behind them. Both Curran and Throop would be doubly determined now that they should never get there.

Now a new sound came, above the steady beat of the rain—a muffled but steady roaring, which grew in volume as they went on. But the way the horse was slipping and sliding, its hoofs stirring in gravel and rock, he knew that they were descending the last steep slope to the river. And here the noise was ominous, deep, throaty with menace.

The bay stopped, and while it was too dark to see, Owen could sense the nervousness in the horse. This was an intelligent animal, and it knew what was going on just about as well as he did. It knew that their job was to get back across the river again, now that this night foray had been taken care of. It had come this far without deviation. But now it was apprehensive about what lay ahead.

It seemed too, to Owen, that the cayuse had stopped considerably short of where they had entered and left the water before. He dismounted, and took a couple of cautious steps, and felt the swirl of the current against his boots. And kicked into a bush, bending to the sweep of the water.

That bush told him what he had guessed. Where they had entered the water before, there had been no brush growing—only the rocky bottom of

the stream bed, partly exposed. Such brush as had grown close on either side of the ford had been back up, forty feet or so from the water line. That meant that the river had risen three or four feet in the last three or four hours, spreading out this far. Somewhere up above there was a really heavy storm, and the whole thing was having its effect now.

He had known something of that in advance, too—how quickly this Humboldt, rising out of a desert and losing itself in a desert again, could come to flood crest. That was why he had been so anxious to get the herd safely across, with storm beginning. It was lucky that they had done so, for no herd could cross when the new day dawned.

The sullen roar of it was a deep, ominous growl, compared to its voice earlier in the night. Attesting to the resistless power of the current. Out there in the middle it would be ugly—doubly so to attempt it in such pitch-blackness as this.

Owen shivered, thinking of Cynthia, of one overburdened horse. Yet there was no choice but to go ahead. If they waited for daylight, it would be fatal. His crew were all on the far side and Throop and his bunch would be along here with the dawn. By daylight, too, the river, whatever it might be now, would be worse.

"Looks like we're between the devil and the deep river, for sure," Owen muttered. "And of the two, I'll chance the river."

17

River To Cross



WEN swung on to the horse again, explaining his decision to Cynthia. He could feel her tremble a little, but she agreed without hesitation.

"It's the only way, of course," she said. "And I'm not frightened—not with you along, Jess."

"I wish I was half as good at doing jobs as you and Hank seem to think," he retorted. "But at least we can't get any wetter. We'll likely have to swim, once we're out in it. That means to drop off, on the lower side, below the horse, and hang on to a saddle-strap, or his tail. And let him do the rest. But whatever you do, hang on!"

"I will," Cynthia promised, but he could detect a tremor in her voice. Suddenly she turned, clung to him.

"Oh, Jess," she whispered. "Don't let anything happen! Take care of yourself! First father, then mother, then Hank—and now, if anything was to happen to you—I couldn't stand it!"

"I don't aim to let anything happen—now," he agreed. "I've got something to live for—something more than just a job to do. And I aim to do it!"

She shivered again, in his arms, then steadied. He did not mention any of the nameless horrors which might be ahead of them, out there in the river—treacherous currents, uprooted trees which might strike them without warning, or tangle them hopelessly in their roots or branches. This was something which, since they could not guard against it, must be risked.

Again the cayuse hesitated, plainly not liking what lay ahead. But at Owen's urging it took the water, splashing ahead. By the time they reached the shore line, or where it had been earlier in the evening, it was suddenly swimming, and the force of the current was like a giant hand—pushing, shoving, puling all at once. And the worst would be on ahead, at the crest.

Owen quickly dropped off, and Cynthia, at his word, did the same. Now the cayuse was swimming, going down river with the current, but working its way along. Barring something unforeseen, it would get across.

It took all the courage that was in Cynthia to trust herself to that dark current, even with Owen close behind her. Only the knowledge that this was the only way, that all their lives depended on it, could force her to act. And in the water, buoyed up only

by the hold to the strap, and the swimming of the horse, it was worse. There was an unbelievable power to the river tonight, a sucking drag that seemed intent on tearing her loose and swirling her away and into the nameless night of the gorge on down below.

That gorge, which she had sighted that evening, was a worse thing than any which they had been through or around. Once in it, and there would be no chance at all, even by daylight, and in normal water. At night and in such a flood—

Now the cayuse was having a hard battle of it. She could sense that in its desperate thrashing, the straining to keep going, and not become only a chip tossed by the waters. Even so, the current was shoving them down faster than they were going across. And suddenly, she became aware that Owen was no longer swimming along with them.

Just how she knew it she could not have told. It was impossible to open one's mouth or to talk, under such conditions. A shout would hardly be audible even in her own ears. And the blackness was as close to being total as anything could be. Yet she knew that he had slipped away, or lost his hold—that he was fighting it alone, somewhere in that vasty desolation of waters.

She wanted to cry out, to let go—anything. But he had cautioned her above all things to hang on, and she knew that she could do nothing to help by losing her head. She clung fast, and now the crest was behind them, the horse was suddenly floundering in water so shallow that, despite its swiftness, it was possible to walk instead of swimming.

OWEN had let go because he knew it was the only way. There was fear in him too, fear of this black current which dragged at them so powerfully. It was far worse than something which you could see to fight against. And he had hoped against hope that the big bay might be able to battle it, with the double handicap of the two of them like a tail to a kite, behind it, and take them

through to the far shore.

But the horse was tired. It had been a long, bitter day, with the choking dust and later the mud. A day in which it had earned its rest, and found none. He had turned back, for a second fording of the river, back along the road. Without rest, without a chance for it to have any supper.

Following that, the already weary nag had carried double for several miles. And now, in this bitter mill-race, it was just too much. Owen could tell by its floundering, by the way in which the current had begun to shove them along, that the horse was in danger of losing such control as it had, and becoming only a helpless bit of floatsam. If that happened, all three of them would be lost.

The horse deserved a chance, and Cynthia had to have it. He let go. And then, swimming desperately, with the full force of the river hitting him, he could tell better what the cayuse had been up against.

Before, the horse, swimming partly above him, had helped to break the full shock of that current, its strength had aided his own immeasurably. Now he was on his own, and the notion of a chip on the current was vivid in his mind. That was just about all that he was.

He knew that he was being swept downstream far too fast, but there was not much that he could do about it. There was a leaden weight to his legs his clothes and boots soggy with water. Weakness crept in him, for he had had nothing to eat since morning, and that seemed an infinity ago. And the water was cold—a cold that sapped at such little strength as was left in him.

It was the thought of Cynthia that made him fight on. And suddenly something helped. Evidently the river made a bend here, the current turned, and suddenly it had shoved him past that murderous crest, into comparatively calm water. His feet touched bottom, and he staggered, all but exhausted, on to the muddy shore.

Then, above the ceaseless surge of the current, he heard a voice—Cynthia's voice, calling his name. The

desolate quality of it hurt him, even as he thrilled to the sound of it. It was like a little lost child, stumbling hopelessly in the dark.

He answered, and heard the quick catch in her own voice. And then she was beside him, though he could not see her, and he gathered her in his arms and held her close, feeling her trembling again.

"Oh, Jess," she said. "I thought you were gone!"

"I'm fine," he said. "Now. Where's the horse?"

"On this side. Somewhere," she said, a little vaguely. "I didn't think any more about it. I wanted to find you."

"We'd better find the camp," he retorted. "And get you warm and dry. I could stand a cup of hot coffee myself."

"That would be heaven," she agreed. And they tramped on, slipping and sliding, falling a time or so, no longer caring about that. A gleam of light grew out of the blackness, and they found Big John, the Major, Mammy Green and Mandy, all anxiously waiting for them, clustered about Owen's horse.

"He just came in here, with an empty saddle," the Major explained, his voice rough with anxiety. "And the devil of it was, we didn't see what we could do."

"If you've got some grub ready, and then a spot fixed where a man can sleep, I'll show you what I can do, along those lines," Owen assured him.

THE RAIN had stopped by daylight, but the river, behind them, was savage with the power it had drained from the land overnight. There was no sign of any enemy—red or white. What lay ahead now was a trail about which Owen knew only a little, and that was not encouraging. They would keep on now, down the south bank, to Lassen's Meadow. Not a good road, for man or beast.

Beyond the meadow a choice was offered, to swing west with the Lassen road, or follow on south toward Green Meadow and the Humboldt

sink beyond. And here again, from such information as he had of both routes, Owen knew that the choice would be a toss-up. Both routes had their good points, but both were bristling with bad ones.

There was another seventy miles of desolate emptiness ahead now. True, the river kept on their course, and because of the high water, Owen knew that water would not be too serious a problem, as it would a little later in the season, when the river all but vanished in the sands, and the water which remained grew thick and stinking, scarcely drinkable even to the extremes of thirst.

Now, despite its storm-swollen addition, the river was gradually growing smaller. Here it followed a twisting course, through a valley twenty or thirty miles wide. There was sage and sparse grass, but the cattle were hungry. And they would keep on being hungry for the next few days.

This, it seemed to Owen, was as desolate a waste as he had ever beheld. Even the presence of the river could not make it what a valley ought to be. As the sun came out, the sandy soil dried swiftly, and grew hot underfoot. Alkali dust began to billow up around them, the water, such as lingered in sloughs and water holes, was rank and bitter with it. The land again was turning a sickly white, like the belly of a decaying fish.

Now, as they traveled, the sand grew deeper, blistering. Here the hills, gradually receding, were brown and naked in appearance. The river was ever more sluggish, its current thick with brownish mud. It seemed incredible that there could be such an abrupt and unpleasant change in what had been such a mighty river, but the evidence of it was before their eyes, under their feet—in their nostrils.

"If there was any of that rain down this far, sure and it didn't have much effect," the Major commented.

That was only too apparent. Yet they were in luck, for enough of the flood waters had reached this far that the cattle were not suffering. And

there was, for the time being, no sign of any enemies.

"Likely they figger to let us have the trouble av this stretch to ourselves," the Major sighed. "If we get past the worst, they'll have circled, like buzzards, and be waitin' for us."

OWEN had no doubt that he was right. Since it was apparent now that both Curran and the party of Mormons wanted the herd gotten through, they would be foolish indeed to take over the grief of driving them, when by waiting a little they could profit by what Owen and his men were forced to do.

For driving a big herd, or indeed any stock at all, in this country, was continual grief and hard work for the riders. Always hungry now, foot-sore as well, the cattle wanted to stray in search of food, to get off to the side and rest. There were muddy backwaters of the river that would engulf an unwary beast like quicksand if they were not watched. It seemed as if nature had been able to think of practically every sort of hindrance for those foolish enough to travel this way.

One of the party was enjoying it all. Johnny reveled in the attention showered on him by all the party, and the Major, when Mandy permitted, took the boy up in front of his saddle.

"Sure and we'll make a cowboy out av him yet," he said. "He's a promisin' lad."

"I'm sure he couldn't have a better teacher," Mandy dimpled, and the Major's mustaches seemed to stand a little straighter.

Reports from other travelers decided Owen to keep on south, once the meadow was reached. Some were turning west, but that route was at least equally long, dry and miserable. Yet the alternate course was receiving plenty of dubious publicity.

Now there was an unpleasant scattering beside the trail—of deserted wagons, dead horses and oxen. But there was grass, of a sort—tule marshes and other scraggly growth—at Lassen's meadow. A chance to refresh themselves and gather strength for

the next stretch ahead, called by some the worst stretch of any along all the great road. On to the great meadow of the Humboldt.

18

Mormon Station



NOW they were really into sands—a weary monotony of it which blistered feet through the leather of boots, which worked into boots and became an added torment. There was no escape from it, either for man or beast. The herd, hoof-sore to

begin with, limped now and that pitious bawling was in their throats again, a ceaseless wail of torment coming up in anguished protest.

But no one could stop for pain, for rest, nor for any other reason. Here, more than ever, the all-powerful rule of the road was a must. To keep traveling, ever and always. Go on or perish. There was no feed here. Grass did not grow in such country. There were clumps of tough, leathery willows along the banks of the murky river, but not enough of them to mean anything to such a bunch as they were driving.

Yet the water kept life in them, and the great meadow of the Humboldt came as a doubly welcome sight. Here was grass. The term meadow was a misnomer, for it was more a marsh, cut by winding sloughs. But, though the cattle were continually in danger of bogging down, this was life-giving. There were springs here—plenty of them. Each one, even each bucket as it seemed, filled with little, bright-green water snakes when you dipped it up. Cynthia and Mandy shivered and shut their eyes, then resolutely pried them open again and swooshed them out. Water was water, whatever it contained.

There were blessings here, of a sort peculiar to the country. The Utes,

with their venom and hostility, had been left behind. Twice more they had harassed, along the fringes of the herd, withdrawing sullenly before the rifles. But the Indians here, Paiutes now, at least were friendly.

"Reckon they're better than the other kind," the Major sighed. "Though they ain't what you'd call no unmitigated blessing."

These Paiutes were something like the Diggers—easy-going, almost too friendly, always under foot. Willing to work for small pay. Anxious to trade their special stock in trade, sugar harvested here from the cane-like reeds of the marsh.

That sugar was simple to gather. It bubbled out in great drops and hardened in the sun. All that was necessary was to strip the clusters of it from the bushes and have a special sweet. The Indians considered it a treat. The fact that myriads of small insects likewise had a taste for the sap and embedded themselves thickly in the hardening crusts only made it more filling and palatable to the Paiutes.

With the herd fed and rested, they kept on south, toward the Carson. Here was the last long stretch of bad trail which must be covered. Once the Carson was reached, it would be easy going. Which was somewhat akin to telling a sinner of the joys beyond the gates of paradise—joys which lay beyond the gates of death.

Some of the emigrants were swinging here and taking the Truckee river road, but again it was a doubtful choice. And Owen had once been along the Carson, and he had some idea of what they would be getting into.

Humboldt Lake had the look and taste of soapsuds. But the water beyond was worse. Here was salt again—salt and alkali, in mixtures or separately, but all undrinkable. Owen decreed that they should travel by night, and rest by day. Such rest as might be had in a thirst-tortured, sun-scorched land.

There was relief from the heat at night, but in this, as in all things, the land went to violent extremes. Icy winds swept the desert as soon as the sun was gone, taking the place of the heat. The change in extremes was enervating, and it was hard to tell which was the worst. Save that coolness spurred you ahead.

Now there was stunted sagebrush along the way. But the grass had vanished like the water. Once more it was a case of push on, of racing against time and thirst, to reach water in time. And now the accumulated ills of all these bad stretches were catching up with them, so that the faltering herd was beginning to falter indeed.

IT SEEMED to Owen that he had never known enough sleep or rest. Life now was an endless succession of hours in the saddle, urging a weary herd to keep moving. Nothing in his experience was like this nightmare drive. Had Hank been able to envision a half of what it would mean to reach California with a herd, he would have shied away from the notion as they now must shy away from water—water, while every nerve and pore of the body cried out for it, yet water so heavy with salt that it was like the brine in a pork barrel.

They were in Destruction Valley now. A place aptly named by those who had gone before. Here, gold-seekers who had pushed this far, braving the dangers of thousands of miles of trail, firm in the belief that they could find nothing new or worse, were being grimly disillusioned—and dying like flies.

Most of them had started originally for Oregon, with the thought of rich farm lands there, and no notion of the Spanish land of California. The news of gold had reached them along the trail, causing them to change their plans and to turn south at the Bend of the Bear—even if they were lacking in supplies by then, lacking in every sort of thing

needed for traversing the desert.

The cattlemen were finding them along the trail now—finding them, and having their own troubles added to by the need in common humanity, of helping those who had reached the last extremity and could go no further. Men and teams who had supposed that they were equal to any hazard, but who had suddenly discovered what the trail could be like when it chose to stop them just short of triumph.

Here the going was really tough. The sand was like particles of iron, clinging to hoofs and feet, leaden weights which made each step an effort, each new step a torment.

The Major, with day and its heat surging upon them again, swiped the sweat from his eyes and forced a grin.

"Sure and we'll earn our wages hereabouts," he said. "And ain't it a swate-smellin' place?"

The aroma of bloated, rotting carcasses, of animals which had fallen not to rise again, was an unending stretch now. There was no escape from it. While the snow-capped Sierras, lifting in the distance like mirages, were an added torment. Until, when it seemed that the big herd could be urged no further, that the flesh of men must falter and their bones bleach here as well, the cattle lifted their heads and took a fresh interest in life. They had scented water—the Carson was ahead.

Here was life again, at the Carson—sweet cold water, teeming with trout, water like nectar of the gods. With green cottonwoods beside the river, lifting to the brassy sky, which somehow had a kinder look now, and grass. Real grass, sweet and toothsome, no longer the harsh gritty reeds of sun-scorched marshes. Paradise for man and beast.

THE CREW eyed Owen with a new respect. Some had said frankly that it couldn't be done, and

the conviction of disaster had grown in all of them along those last desperate miles. It had been Owen, a gaunt scarecrow who encouraged and urged them on, or forced them, man and beast alike, to keep moving, who had brought them through. Many a traveler, encountered along other and less evil stretches of the road, had prophesied that the valley of destruction would finish them off. Yet now the desert lay behind them.

"They're not what you'd call very good lookin' beef," Big John commented viewing the herd. "Kinda lean an' gant—like me. But they'll pick up again—same as the rest of us. I never knew I could hold as much water as I've drunk this last day."

The worst of the trail—of sun and sand and bad water, or no water at all, lay behind them. Now they would follow the Carson into California, a green trail to a greener land.

But the Sierras had still to be crossed. And very soon now, Owen was certain, Curran and Throop would be making themselves felt again. They had left it to the desert to do its worst. But the fact that the big herd was still on its feet, now automatically doubled in value as it neared market, would assure a new attempt to get it. And this one would probably be carefully planned and viciously delivered.

New names were on the tongues of everyone now—Mormon Station, Hangtown, Mud Lake, Tragedy Spring. The golden land was just ahead, and the virus of excitement was in everyone's blood.

The cottonwoods ran back from the river, evergreens carpeted the rising hills. After the bare desolation of the long desert trail, it was paradise. It was also a hazard, for now it was no longer possible to see the long line of the herd as one unit. With the mountains close ahead, the valley winding, it was generally impossible to see more than a small part of it.

There were more people here as

well—more emigrants arriving, and a fairly populous scattering of old settlers—people who had been in California at least a week already. So neither Owen nor the Major gave much thought to what was now a common occurrence when half a dozen horsemen jogged into sight, where they were riding, near the point of the herd. The newcomers pulled up, passing the time of day.

"Nice lookin' bunch o' beef you got there," one man commented. "Come far?"

"Utah," Owen said briefly.

"Utah, eh? Some trip, I'll bet. Say, you wouldn't be this Owen, now—but I reckon you must be. Ain't heard of nary other feller drivin' a herd."

"I'm Owen," Owen acknowledged, a little wearily. And started to see a gun in the hand of the other man, as he slid it out from under his coat. Guns had appeared like flowing magic in the hands of the other riders as well.

"Be a lot better if you and the Major just hand over yore guns peaceful," the other man explained, half-apologetically. "I'm Lasby," he added. "And you're both under arrest."

WITH GUNS on them, there was nothing to do but obey. The thing had been worked with a smooth casualness which had given them no advance inkling of trouble. Owen was a little stunned. But the Major was vociferous, his mustaches quivering.

"And just what's the m'anin' of this?" he demanded. "Sure and is it an offence to bring meat to a hungry land?"

"That is no crime, but there have been others, back along the trail—as you may recall," Lasby said carefully. "You will be given a chance to defend yourselves, all in good time."

The man had changed, almost in the moment of making them prisoners. Now he was more careful and pre-

cise in speech, less friendly in demeanor. As he saw the Major's glance range them, he shrugged.

"There is no use in looking for others of your crew," he said. "There is a place of entertainment ahead, off at the roadside—some call it the Shack. It was not difficult to get them to head for it, in the belief that you had so instructed."

As if in confirmation, Owen saw new horsemen swinging into sight, taking charge of the cattle to keep them moving. Men whom he had no difficulty in recognizing. These were of Dawse Throop's crew.

Now the thing was becoming clear. Mormon Station was not far ahead, and these men too, of course, were Mormons. Throop had appealed to them as fellow-Mormons, and they were assisting him in this manner. What he had been unable to gain in open attack, Throop was seeking to win by subtlety and treachery.

Apparently, as Lasby said, the crew had been fooled on some plausible pretext. They would be decoyed off to the Shack and gotten drunk, not too difficult a job after the long dry weeks of the trail. By the time they were finally allowed to sober up, they would have caused for headaches—but it would be too late for them to do anything about it.

The Major looked at him, a little blankly. "Sure, and they seem to have made fools of us, Jess," he sighed.

"You are showing good sense in coming peacefully," Lasby declared. "Others are posted in the brush on both sides of you. Had you resisted—" he shrugged.

It would have been sudden death, of course. *Which is what they aim to give us in any case—only they'll go through the forms!* Owen thought bleakly. Here numbers were overwhelmingly on the side of the Mormons, as well as familiarity with the country.

Probably only one thing had saved them from massacre at the hands of

Throop's crew—the fact that Throop had to play out the farce here, if he wanted the assistance of his co-religionists. This was a wild country, here on the border—where riff-raff was gathering from the four corners of the earth. Lawlessness was a by-word. A few extra killings would attract little attention.

But because of the orders of Brigham Young, and even more because the average man was instinctively hostile where a Mormon was concerned, the group who had settled here preferred to avoid any open action which could be traced back to them. That, in the final analysis, accounted for them being still alive.

So far, there was no sign of Dawse Throop. Now they were pulling off the main road, back among the trees and brush. The trees, here, were of a size to dwarf similar species farther east.

THEY GLIMPSED a log cabin which, from the talk among the others, Owen knew was Mormon Station. But they were not being taken to it, but to another, more remote cabin farther back among the trees—one of which few travelers would be aware. Owen's eyes narrowed as they sighted it, for two wagons were just pulling up to it as well. One was Mandy Carlin's, the other belonged to Cynthia Shea.

On the driver's seat of the latter, Dawse Throop sat. Several other horsemen surrounded the wagons.

Owen's heart sank. Here, with the end of the trail in sight, was disaster. And, while he could see no sure way in which he might have guarded against it, he knew that he should have done so. That had been his job, and they had caught him napping.

Cynthia, Mandy and Mammy Green, the latter protesting vociferously, were being herded across to the house and in. Cynthia turned, and saw Owen for a moment, and waved, and was quickly hustled out of sight.

More people were arriving here now—men on foot and on horseback. A full score of them—all Mormons, of course. Dawse Throop approached, and there was an oily triumph in his smile which he could not quite hide, though he was endeavoring to mask it with a properly straight face.

"It's a long trail that has no turn-in'—and justice at the end of it," he intoned, showing that he had absorbed something from his association with Eliphalet Elwood. "Thanks a lot for doin' this peaceful and orderly, friends."

"It is a pleasure as well as a duty, to assist a fellow-Saint," Lasby retorted. "This way."

Dismounted, the Major stared around, then gave a defiant twist to his mustache.

"Sure, and there's always somethin' to make life interestin', Jess," he confided. "And if 't was only meself, now, I'd be right int'rested. But if these unregenerates misuse the ladies now, wurra, trouble there will be!"

The cabin was a big one, and a meal was being prepared for the crowd by a couple of women, assisted by a man. A haunch of venison, turning on a spit in the big fireplace at one end, was the main article of diet. Owen looked around, but there was no sign of Cynthia or Mandy, nor of the boy, Johnny. There was, however, another room at the side, with closed door.

Curious looks were directed at the Major and himself, but there was a tacit sort of courtesy here, and no one said anything in regard to the subject for which it was apparent that everyone had gathered here for.

For it was plain to them that the Mormons of this community, or at least the leading men among them, were here to hold court. They talked on other subjects while the meal was served, Owen and the Major being given heaped plates impartially. Only then did Dawse Throop's ribald sense of humor come to the surface.

"The condemned men ate a hearty

meal," he chortled. "Don't say we didn't feed you good, anyway."

But nothing more of that nature was said until the meal was finished. Then the room was cleared, and the two women went into the adjoining room, returning with Cynthia and Mandy. They looked anxiously to where Owen and the Major had been led, but there was no opportunity for conversation.

A TALL, white-bearded man, patriarchal in appearance, took a chair at one end of the big room, and as he settled himself, silence fell. It was apparent that he was the elder here, and in charge of proceedings.

Using a heavy cane for gavel, Sankey pounded on the floor, looking about.

"I guess everybody here knows what this is about," he said. "That we're here to try these two Gentiles for crimes charged against them. But we will do it in orderly fashion, and fair. Dawse Throop, state your case."

Throop did so. He began with the killing of Paul Burton, back in the cabin near Salt Lake, and how he and Elwood had been sent at the head of a party, or posse, on orders of Brigham Young, to find the guilty men and see that justice was done. He recounted, fairly enough, the evidence of witnesses at the shooting—how the two Gentiles had come there, demanding whiskey, how they had named each other as Major McCord and Jess Owen, how the one called Owen had worn a black and white checkered coat, and then had shot Burton, all without provocation.

Tense silence held the room as he proceeded. Most of this was new to these men here, of course, and highly impressive. Throop went on to explain what had happened along the trail, and what had transpired when they had encountered the cowboys at the Humboldt, and the killing of Elwood. Then, as a final gesture, he held up the coat for all to see.

"It was in the wagon," he added.

There was a grimness to the silence now, broken by the impassive voice of Sankey.

"These are evil things—such things as murder," he said. "Is that all, Mr. Throop?"

Throop looked about, and his voice rang loud in the hush of the room.

"Evil things they are," he agreed. "But that ain't all—nor the worst! I've saved that for the last! These two Godless Gentiles are also guilty of wife-stealin'!" He pointed dramatically at Cynthia and Mandy.

"That woman Mandy was abducted and brought along by the Major, there," he said. "Her bein' the third wife of a friend o' mine, back near Salt Lake. And she—" here his finger stabbed at Cynthia. "She's my second wife—abducted by this murderin' wearer of this black an' white coat!"

19

The Verdict



WEN listened, completely staggered by this wild accusation. Murder, the killing of a Mormon, was bad enough. But it was, as he knew, nothing as compared to the stealing of a Mormon woman by a Gentile. In the eyes of a Mormon, that was the supreme, the unforgivable crime.

From back beside the Humboldt he had known that Throop wanted Cynthia, but he had not been prepared for anything like this. Now the cleverness of the man was apparent. If there had been any possible chance, for himself and the Major, before a jury of strangers, and however prejudiced that might be to start with, Throop was playing a trump card which would stir them to such anger

that there could be no possible doubt as to the decision.

And he was doing it shrewdly. Some of these men who lived at or near Mormon Station had talked, of course, with Throop's crew, enough to get their version of what had happened, so far as the killings were concerned. That would be ample corroboration now for Dawse Throop's story—far more effective than if those same witnesses were here to be questioned as to details.

To make sure of that, Throop had sent them all on ahead with the herd. There remained only the testimony of the Major and himself, of Cynthia and Mandy—and Throop had moved to discredit all that in advance.

Cynthia was staring, angry amazement in her eyes, at this latest charge. But it was the Major who found his tongue first.

"Wurra, now, and ye go too far, Throop!" he cried. "Sure and that's one thing I've niver done—to steal any woman, much less the wife of another man! There's not a word of truth in what he says, Judge!"

"The idea!" Mandy chimed in. "Do you think I'd be extra wife to any man? And my own husband buried back along the trail—"

Throop stood, grinning a little, making no effort to interrupt, until Mandy had run down, and Cynthia, more calmly, had added her own denial. Then he shrugged.

"Naturally, after runnin' away with this pair, they wouldn't admit it," he pointed out. "But all of you know, friends, that some of our women have done this sort of thing before. I do not hold these two particularly to blame."

He had taken the right tone. Most of the Mormon women were loyal to their religion and their husbands, but, like Throop himself, there were some women as well as men in the organization who had no principles of any kind, and more than one woman had been both surprised and bitterly re-

sentful at finding herself only a secondary wife in a household. Some of these had taken advantage when the chance offered to run away with some California-bound man. All of which, of course, had added to the bitter feeling on both sides.

Since it was obvious that a woman who would do that sort of thing would also be likely to deny it, no credence was placed in the denial now. This was the supreme crime—worse than murder. And there was anger in the eyes of most of the men gathered there in judgment.

"Men who will steal wives are worthy of death," the Elder intoned. "But a wife who will do a thing like that is no less guilty. No less deserving of death."

Throop looked sorrowful. "I know how that is," he agreed. "But I don't hold it too much ag'in the women. There's a lot of excitement in the air, these days—talk of Californy, and gold, and all that sort of thing. And men that 'll induce women to do that are mainly to blame, the way I look at it. I don't approve, you understand—a man can't, in a case like that. But I'm willin' to take all these things into consideration and forgive her, an' take her back. And I reckon my friend will feel the same way about his wife."

If a crowning touch had been needed, that was it. The others commended Throop for such a fine and forgiving attitude, and agreed that, in such a case, he should be the one to decide. Though some offered advice.

"If they try any more actin' up, you would be plumb justified in floggin' 'em—for the good o' their souls, of course."

"Don't think I won't," Throop said grimly, and at his gesture, still protesting, Cynthia and Mandy were taken out of the room again. Their testimony had been completely discredited.

The whole thing, like many another frontier trial, by whomever conduct-

ed, was a mockery, a travesty on justice. Owen knew that. But he sensed that most of these men, including Sankey, honestly desired to see that justice was done, at least according to their lights. After the furor had quieted down a little, Sankey turned to question the prisoners.

"You fellows have heard the testimony," he said. "Do you have anything to say for yourselves?"

Owen shrugged. "Would anything that we say be believed, in any case?" he demanded.

Sankey blinked. But his answer was to turn to the Major.

"You are Major McCord?" he asked.

The Major's face was still red from anger, but he gave a vicious twist to his mustache in affirmation. "You've said it, Your Honor," he agreed. "Major McCord it is."

"And might I ask, sir, where you acquired the title of Major?"

McCord shrugged in his turn. "'T is like your own title, when it comes to that, Judge," he nodded. "Like the 'honorable' in yours, sure and it means nothing at all!"

There was a momentary silence, then a red flush of anger rippled up from the white whiskers, and Sankey pounded violently on the floor with his cane again. "It's a waste of time to question unregenerate Gentiles," he rasped. "All we get is lies and mockery."

"That's what you seem to like best, sure," the Major murmured, and fixed his eyes on Throop.

Owen could appreciate the sardonic humor of his friend. They had been in some tight places together, but this seemed about the worst. The Major knew well enough that their guilt had already been decided, and that nothing which they might say would have the slightest effect. Throop had contrived shrewdly. He could return, if he ever chose to go back to Utah, with a perfectly straight story to tell to Brigham

Young. And, knowing that Cynthia would have nothing to do with him if she could help it, he had taken this grim short cut to claiming her for a wife, with these men here to swear that that was what she was.

As for the Major and himself, they were to die. It remained only to decide upon the means of it, and that was already being discussed.

"There's only one kind of death fittin' for such as them," one man intoned angrily. "Hangin'! Let's take 'em out and string 'em up to the nearest tree!"

SEVERAL others echoed the sentiment. From their standpoint, Owen could hardly blame them. They were convinced that the Major and himself were guilty as charged of these crimes, and they certainly merited hanging. Besides, they would be executing only the justice which Brigham Young had decreed should be administered in due course.

But cooler heads prevailed. Sankey pounded vigorously with his cane again.

"We're all agreed on one point," he said. "That they're to be hung. That's only justice. A carryin' out of the law. But we can't go off half-cocked now and make fools of ourselves. That ain't what Brigham Young ordered at all. And if we try it, we'll just have a war on our hands with every Gentile in the country, which we don't want—and there would be no justice in that."

Heads nodded in agreement. It was Lasby who offered a suggestion.

"Reckon I've got a scheme for handlin' it," he suggested. "One so there won't be no trouble to attach to any of us."

"Let's hear it," Sankey invited.

"Well—you all know how things are, up in Hangtown. That sink of iniquity started out by callin' itself Dry Diggings, until there was so many lynchin's that everybody got to callin' it Hangtown. And the name

fits right well, these days."

"Ain't no doubt of that," Saukey conceded. "Well?"

"Well, if we was to take them up there—and string 'em up, while the rest of the town's asleep, to that big oak in the middle of town—then it wouldn't excite no comment to speak of. Folks there are so used to findin' that sort of frooit hangin' to that tree, that it's a reg'lar occupation for a couple of 'em to cut down what they find, mornin's, and bury 'em."

"Sounds like a good idea," the judge agreed. "Only thing is, when can you find a time that that town's sleeping? It's the most ungodly place in this whole section of country—always turnin' night into day."

"If we load 'em in a wagon and start out right now, we should get there just a little before daylight," Lasby said readily. "And that's about the only time that that town sleeps."

It was the sort of thing which appealed to them. A sort of poetic justice, which would also avert any suspicion from themselves. Lasby offered to drive the wagon to transport them up the mountain, but Throop declined.

"I'll have one of my men drive it," he said. "Since we're going that way, anyhow. You folks here have done more'n your part—and I wouldn't want to do nothin' to risk gettin' you involved in trouble with yore neighbors. We'll take 'em there and tend to it, just like you said—and do it plumb discreet."

At his orders, the women were being taken out to Cynthia's wagon again. And Owen and the Major, condemned men now, were loaded into the other wagon. To make sure that there should be no slip, their legs were roped and tied together, then their hands jerked behind their backs and tied tightly as well. Gags were stuffed in their mouths, on the chance that they might attract the attention of anyone along the road.

Flat then on the floor of a wagon-

box, jouncing along a road far from smooth, this last stage of the journey began. On to Hangtown.

20

Curran Changes His Mind



IGHT was upon the land. A moonless night for this part of it, with the stars remote and unfriendly, shedding little light. For the fiftieth time, rolling painfully on the floor of the wagon box, Owen blamed himself for falling into this trap,

though he still could see no good way in which it might have been avoided.

They had been alert and on their guard for long and weary weeks, and it was humanly impossible to avoid relaxing a little at times. Likewise, you could not pull guns on every stranger you met along the road, nor rightly consider every man an enemy.

And he had not been looking for anything quite so subtle, not from Dawse Throop. If it had been Greer Curran, now—and the thought made him wonder what had happened to Curran, where he might be.

Everything which had been in this wagon had been removed, so that there was only the bare box, the stained and faded canvas stretched above it. Canvas with a few small holes and tears, made by Ute arrows back at the river canyon. Through one of these tears he could see the faint star shine, then it was blotted out as the wagon jounced again.

They were climbing, and had been doing so for what seemed an endless time. Climbing for the most part steadily and steeply, to judge by the roughness of the ride, the jouncing over big rocks in the road, or when the wheels dropped into ruts. Fre-

quently the straining team must stop and rest a while.

Up here the air was definitely cooler. Summer had been left behind, and it was like the icy night winds along the valley of destruction. On this road you could climb out of summer into something like early spring or fall in a matter of hours. Providing that you and your team, or your oxen, had the strength to make the crest at all, after the long privations of the trail.

On these peaks there was still that snowcap which had been visible so far across the desert, a torment in a waterless land. Now and then Owen knew that snow must be in drifts not far above them, as the wagon ran in mud or water, where the drifts slowly melted.

The gag was a torment, which he had been able to do nothing with, and the thongs cut painfully into wrists and ankles. Working at them had loosened them enough so that the circulation was not quite cut off, but the tortured flesh had swelled in turn, so that they were ever more painful.

Rolling and jolting with every motion of the springless wagon, Owen had been trying to find some nail, some roughness in the wagon box, against which to work his bonds, to try and loosen them. So far, without success.

Two or three times he had gotten back to back with the Major, and they had clawed with futile fingers at each others knots—only to be rolled apart again. A few times the man on the seat had raised the flap of canvas between, had looked back to be sure that they were all right. Satisfied, he was paying less attention now, as the hours increased his weary drowsiness. Now Owen caught the Major's whisper.

"Got rid of that rag, praises be!" he said. "And I've got an idea, Jess. I can't quite do it alone—been tryin' it. But if I could get up over the end

gate and drop to the road, then maybe I could rub myself loose on a rock. If you could sort of give me a boost, now!"

That was an idea. Even with his own gag removed, the Major could not help him in turn. But if between them they could get McCord out, he might manage to get loose and get help before it was too late.

THERE WAS plenty of risk in such a course. To tumble headlong off a wagon, going up hill in the night, with no knowledge of what the road might be like below, helpless to try and even land right, was no pleasant prospect. A man might strike his head on a rock or log and injure himself badly, or break a leg, or roll and tumble—perhaps off a ledge at the side, straight to his death or fall to a bad injury and lie there in the road. But it was at least worth trying.

Owen rolled to the back of the wagon, and the Major, with a few tries, got his legs elevated and sticking out above the end-gate. He had done that much before, but, unable to use his arms, had been stymied short of lifting his body enough to heave it out. Now, with Owen's legs under him, lifting as much as he could manage, the thing was accomplished. One moment the Major was a weight upon him, the next the wagon lurched and he was gone.

There was no particular sound. The wagon kept going, the driver without any suspicion that he had lost a passenger. There was a chance now that the Major could work his bonds loose and get help. A chance—but not a good enough one to count on. There were too many if's connected with it. But it was at least a hope for the Major.

And now maybe he had one himself. Here was something that he had failed to find before—a loose bit of iron stripping which ran around the rim of the wagon boxes additional support. Iron strap, about three-quarters of an inch in width, less than a

quarter in thickness. A screw had worked partly loose, and a jagged end of the strap stuck up perhaps an inch.

It was not easy to get at, particularly with the constant jolting of the wagon throwing him off and away from it from time to time. To work his way back to it was slow and painful, and Owen was so bruised by the constant pounding that he knew he would be black and blue for a week—providing he somehow managed to be living, a week from now. The prospects for that were dubious.

But he could at least keep trying. It was the thought of Cynthia which spurred him to redoubled effort. She would be all right tonight, so long as he was still alive. Throop's first thought would be to get himself and the Major hung, to get the herd safely over the pass, and disposed of before Owen's crew could sober up and take an interest in things again. After that, with money in his pockets, his own men scattered to the four corners of the diggings, Dawse Throop would feel safe. But not until then.

The sharp edge of the iron gouged into the flesh as he tried to catch the knots on it, and Owen could feel warm blood on his hands. Now and then he did catch the knots, but it was a painfully slow process. Whoever had tied those knots had done a good job. There seemed no more give to them than there was mercy to be found in Throop.

The miles were dragging ones, up the pass, the hours as painfully slow. If something would only happen to break the monotony—but nothing did. The driver, half-asleep now, seemed satisfied that his prisoners were safe, and contented himself with rare glances back. Seeing one dark form in the gloom he assumed that the other must be there as well.

It seemed to Owen that the knots were loosening a little. And they must, he knew, be getting near the top of the long pass. How far on to Hangtown? Not far enough—but it

was impossible to hurry, and the jolting and tumbling, combined with the gag in his mouth, made him more than half sick.

NOW THERE was delay—a familiar sound which reached his ears. The herd of cattle! Apparently, Throop had ordered his men to drive all night, to get them across the pass as soon as possible. With a fresh crew to do it, and the cattle in far better shape than they had been, from the days along the grass of the Carson, that was understandable. Likewise, it might be easier to get the herd across by night than by day, for this road was narrow in spots, and had a lot of traffic by day.

But the herd was plainly a delay which Throop had not taken into consideration in regard to this trip to Hangtown. The cattle were strung out for miles, and getting through and past them was not easy. Hope grew in Owen. It looked as if they would still be short of that grim oak when day came again, and if that was so, they might choose to hold him somewhere until the next night.

On the other hand, discovering that the Major had escaped, Dawse Throop might very well decide to finish Owen quickly and be done with it. He could simply toss him off a high ledge and have it solved that simply, without much chance of anyone ever finding out about the crime.

Dawn was unmistakably bringing an end to the long night. The herd had finally been left behind, as his ears told him, and light was stealing into the draped wagon. Sore and weary in every fibre of him, Owen felt his bonds slip a little more, and gritted his teeth for a final effort. And then, like a fanfare for the new day, came a sudden burst of gun-fire.

These were pistols and revolvers, cracking sharply, most of them a bit down the mountain and behind them. The wagon stopped abruptly on a level spot, a startled curse escaping

the driver. And then, from closer at hand, like a clap of thunder, another gun sounded.

Owen heard the driver groan. The horses were skittish, but they stood, tired as they were. The man on the seat wavered there, tumbled and slid to the ground. Owen heard him strike with a dull thud, and groan again. Evidently he was badly wounded.

And this, Owen guessed, would be Greer Curran at last—Curran, with a new-gathered crew of gun-handly, reckless men, gathered here among disgruntled gold-seekers. Curran was using no finesse such as Throop had won with. Each man had resorted to the weapons expected of the other, and each, apparently, was having complete initial success with it.

Apparently Curran's crew had ambushed the Mormons just at daylight, when they were dog-tired from the long night and least alert. It was like Curran, that sort of thing. There were Indians in these hills, of course—Indians who liked to strike in some such fashion as this, whenever the opportunity presented itself, and even close to towns. Indians who had a rankling hatred for the white invaders of their land.

If this was handled swiftly and ruthlessly enough, the killings could be laid to the Indians. And Curran and his new crew could soon dispose of the herd, scatter, and it would be just one more turbulent incident in the wild chapter which was being written in the history of this land.

A FEW GUNS were still cracking. Then came three or four more shots, from somewhere close at hand. Desperately, Owen twisted, and one wrist came free from the other, though the twisted but now-loosened cord still hung. With an effort, he raised his hand then and jerked the gag from his mouth, and felt a vast relief.

Now the gun-fire had died as abruptly as it had begun, leaving a forbidding silence. The horses still

stood, thankful for the chance, and he could hear the heavy wheeze of their breath. The sun was making a crimson splotch in the high eastern sky. He could see it against the interior of the canvas, while he worked his arms to restore the circulation, to get them useable again.

Abruptly, just outside the wagon, there was a new sound again. Bending to try and untie his ankles, Owen tensed, as an unsteady step climbed on the wagon.

Whoever was climbing there was either very tired, or very drunk—or badly shot up. Owen, remembering that last ugly burst of gun-fire, guessed that it would be the latter. Throop and his men, though ambushed, had put up a fight for survival.

The step was on the wagon box itself now, there at the front end, a hand clutched at the canvas flap and swept it aside. And Greer Curran looked in at him.

He was not the debonair Curran that Owen had always known—not even the drunken, demanding Curran of that rain-swept night back from the river. This time Curran was not drunk. As Owen had guessed, he had stopped a bullet or so.

Apparently it was he who had shot the driver, then, unexpectedly, had been gunned by someone else from ambush in turn. Probably he had succeeded in returning the fire and dropping the other man, and then, held up by an overpowering purpose, he had gotten as far as the wagon, had climbed up to look in.

His left arm hung limp at his side, blood running down it in a crimson trickle from an ugly wound just above the elbow. With his right hand he clutched a revolver and held to the canvas flap as well, and there was blood upon that hand as well—blood which ran from a wound in his right shoulder.

For a moment he stood there, and there was a strange blending on his face—of pain, and hate, and triumph,

and of weariness and perhaps something else.

He swayed a little, steadying himself by his hold on the canvas, and there was a new knowledge in his eyes—knowledge that he was close to the end of his trail. But the purpose was still there.

"I heard—you were here, Jess," he said. "And now—now I've got just one shot left—in my gun."

He looked down at it, and there was almost a sardonic amusement in his face as he considered it.

"Just one shot. So it'll have to be for you—since I can't load it up again. Just for you. For if I can't have her—I'll have fewer torments in hell—knowing that you won't either, Jess."

He laughed, then—a raking, unpleasant sound, and lifted the gun and started to steady it, rather painfully. "I always knew—it would come to this, sooner or later, Jess," he sighed. "You knew it, too, of course. And if I lose—you can't win!"

But even with his finger on the trigger, something stayed him. Owen heard it, too—the sound of someone else on horseback, approaching the wagon.

CURRAN turned and swung the gun suddenly, with a speed which Owen would not have thought his wracked body any longer capable of, while black hate washed across his face.

The flap was still back, tumbled open so that Owen could see. It was Dawse Throop who was coming, and he had been hidden for a moment by the bulk of the wagon, and by a clump of trees beyond—hidden from Curran's view until he was quite close. But by the same token, he had failed to see Curran until the latter had the gun on him.

For a long, dragging moment then, the tableau held. Throop was staring at the gun, not moving. He had not seen Owen, and Curran seemed also to have forgotten him, until he spoke

—very quietly, this time, as though the venom was all draining out of him, along with the life-blood.

"Fate's a strange thing, isn't it, Jess?" he asked, almost conversationally. "I never thought it would come to this. But as it is—well, I've one bullet left. And it has to be for this dog. So—good luck, Jess!"

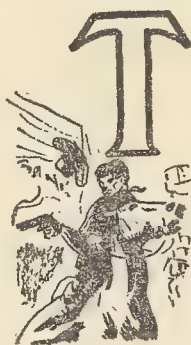
Throop's face was dead white now. The gun was centered on him, and he could read death in Curran's eyes. Death was very close for Greer Curran as well, but that did not stay him. All three of them knew it.

There was almost a smile about Curran's lips now. The weight of the gun was becoming almost too much for him, but he held it steady, and his finger squeezed upon the trigger.

There was an empty click. Somewhere, hurt as he was, Curran had miscounted. His gun was empty. And now dissolution was upon him. He wavered, collapsed, and tumbled head-long back to the ground, almost on top of the other man he had shot off the driver's seat.

21

The High Sierra



THERE was a pasty look on Throop's face, like the unhealthy fringe about those stagnant pools in the desert country. The look was slow in vanishing. He blinked once, and swallowed with a visible effort, his Adam's apple jerking. And then all at once a change came over him.

He dismounted swiftly from his horse and strode to where the two men lay, sprawled criss-cross. And his boot toe dug viciously into the unfeeling man on top. Then, as recollection of more immediate things

came back to him, Throop stepped to the hub of a wheel, and a moment later he was looking down into the wagon box, where Owen lay, on his back, hands under him again.

For a moment they eyed each other, Throop's gaze ranging to Owen's still securely tied ankles, and a sort of guttural triumph, like the growl of a mad dog, rumbled in his throat. Then he leaned forward, reaching down with both big hands.

"There's a cliff right handy here," he said. "Drops so far you can't see the bottom. I'll let you go down and see it from the bottom. Save any more trouble."

There was anger in the man, a hot and heavy rage which seethed and bubbled. But he was still confident. His latest plans had been upset, most of his crew either killed or driven off by Curran's attack, the herd by now probably in the control of this new bunch whom Curran had hired. But Throop still was sure of winning. Curran was dead now. He'd remove Owen, and after that, the Mormons at the foot of the pass would aid him—or there were other men with guns for hire.

It was simple in his mind, all but finished. Until, as his big paws closed on Owen and started to drag and lift, Owen's hands came out from behind his back and reached as well.

Owen had calculated it carefully. Without a gun, and with his ankles still tied, this would be his only chance against Throop. Now he had to make the most of it.

Throop's gun was in its holster, and Owen reached for it, and had a hold on it before he felt the shiver of fear which shook his enemy, and one of Throop's hands released its hold on him and pounced for the gun as well. Throop reared back, straightening, and Owen came up with him, and then they toppled together and were on the ground, rolling, locked together, and the sun, crimson against the canvas, picked them out suddenly here near the crest of the high Sierra.

Overbalanced, Throop hit the ground heavily, Owen half on top of him, and that gave him a momentary advantage. But now the gun was lost in the fall, jarred from the frantic grip of both. Now it was a case of brute strength, and there was one big advantage with Throop. His legs were loose, and his arms were not tired and stiff from the long ordeal to which Owen's had been subjected.

In such a battle, there was just one chance. Owen knew it, and he shifted the grip of both hands—closing them about the bull-dog throat of Throop, hanging on with the merciless tenacity of the same beast. No matter what Throop did, he had to keep his hold.

There was gravel and small, sharp rocks underneath, gouging into flesh as they rolled. Here on the road, with the winy scent of evergreen strong in the nostrils, and the new day upon the mountains, spreading its light down into the valleys below, where shadows still clung like pockets of the night. Particularly thick and black as at the foot of the cliff beside the road.

NO ONE else was coming to aid or to interfere, and hush seemed to be all about them. Even a small bird had stopped its singing, frightened by this many-limbed creature which gyrated so strangely there upon the ground. A hush broken only by a muffled grunting, the subdued sound of blows. For Owen was saying nothing, conserving his own strength, and his fingers had clamped so tightly on Throop's neck that no sound came past his panting lips.

Throop was fighting now with the strength of desperation. Kicking, striving to gouge, then changing his tactics to beat against Owen's face and chest, stopping to grab his wrists and seeking to tear his fingers loose. Owen, head close against the chest of his enemy, only clung the tighter.

Desperation was a mounting terror

in Throop now, and there was the wildness of fear in his bulging eyes. But there was a plan in his head as they rolled and twisted, and suddenly Owen realized what it was.

Throop had brought them almost to the side of the road, to the brink of the ledge which fell straight away to the lingering dark so far below. From down there, somewhere, very faint but musical, came the sound of a stream plunging over rapids. A mountain torrent, rash and impetuous with its own power, tormented but not checked by the rocks in its course. But sounding up here like the wind stirring a gossamer thread of spider web.

At the very brink a tree had grown, before the gold rush started. It had been broken off, so that only a little of the jagged stump remained. Aside from it, there was nothing. And it was Throop's plan now that Owen should go off that cliff. Down into the soft and feathery looking gloom. He had forced him this far, for the supreme effort.

There was still plenty of fight left in Throop. The very violence of fear and of triumph which had stirred him so short a time ago, exploded anew in him now—hastened to almost mad violence by the muted sound of approaching hoof-beats, by a sudden shout—the voice of the Major, then the cry of Cynthia, both of them a little shrill with terror, but full of exhortation and hope.

Help was coming—and this had to be finished first. Even if it meant death at the hands of others only a moment later, Throop was determined to have his vengeance first. And suddenly Owen understood his last blasting purpose. Since he had lost, Throop intended deliberately to hurl himself over the brink, and to take Owen with him.

The others were coming up fast, but not fast enough to get there in time. They could not shoot, for the pair of them were locked together.

Owen strove to hold back, but Throop, holding fast now, was flinging his body with all the energy he had left, and they were rolling. Owen saw the edge, felt the lifting of empty space beneath them.

His head was down, legs thrashing wildly, Throop had lost his hold. But there was only the emptiness of space below.

And then something stopped Owen with a jerk. The last thing in the world that he had expected to be thankful for. The thing which had tormented him through the night, handicapped him in the fight; the rope which tied his ankles together.

His legs, thrashing wildly, had come down across the remnants of that broken stump. And though he hung now, head downward, the rope and the stump held him fast.

CYNTHIA was crying as she helped to pull him up, and then, back a little way, her arms were enfolding him, her lap pillowing his head. While the Major, very professionally, slashed loose those bonds at last.

"Though mebbly ye'd like to kape them a spell longer, eh, Jess—considerin' how handy they've just proved?" he suggested, "Sure and even a rope can have its good points at times."

The Major's mustache was a little bedraggled, and there was anxiety in his face, though it lightened as he turned to look at Mandy, and some of the light of the sunrise seemed in both their faces. And presently the Major recounted his own adventures of the night.

"Sure, and 't was simple enough, the bit that I did," he said. "The fates was kind to me, allowin' me to fall on a bit uv soft ground in the road—and with a rough sharp rock not so far to the side but what I could touch it as I moved. Had I tumbled on it instead, wurra but it might have split me head like a punkin. As it was, a few minutes uv rubbin', and me hands

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DRY STAMPEDE

by D. D. Sharp

Skerry Balton's scheme was effective — in fact, far too much so!

CANARY slapped the hard-twist coil of lariat against the lean rump of a bawling steer. Dust rose like smoke. "I give 'em one more day," he shouted as Curly rode up. "Some of 'em are stretched on their bellies already."

"Hell of a way the old hombre divided his land," growled Curly. "If he'd even stripped it the other way we could drive 'em through the gap."

"A mile long and a quarter wide," assented Canary, "clear across the canyon. It ain't uncommon but it shore hits us hard. Who'd a guessed a skunk like Skeery Balton'd cop them two far pieces with Red Lake in the middle of 'em?"

"Who'd a knowed a man could claim land thataway, jest paying taxes," grumbled Curly. "He shore done them Gutierrez boys a low down trick."

The two waddies rode slowly except when one of them tore after a critter that broke from the big, bawling herd. Dust boiled over the thousands of hide-bound backs as the critters curled their tails and lifted their heads to bawl at the sky. They were starving for grass, but more immediately they were in need of water.

Two days past, wildfire had swept Canary's winter range and half his summer pasture, dry and brittle from a long, burning drought. The fire had started at the south end of Skeery Balton's tax land. It had come like galloping mustangs, spreading as it came, the wind rising as it roared across the grass. Canary and his men met it with wet tow-sacks and they

fought like mad-men; but a thousand men could not have stopped it short of Corrupa arroyo with its wide stretch of barren sand.

The fire had not only burned off all grass tall enough for a cow brute to eat, but it cut off Canary's water hole and dried it up. From Red Lake, a small stream ran southward under big cottonwood trees. Greasewood and rabbit brush grew two feet tall along its bank. Fire laid hold of them to sear the leaves of the cottonwoods and leave them charred and blackened skeletons.

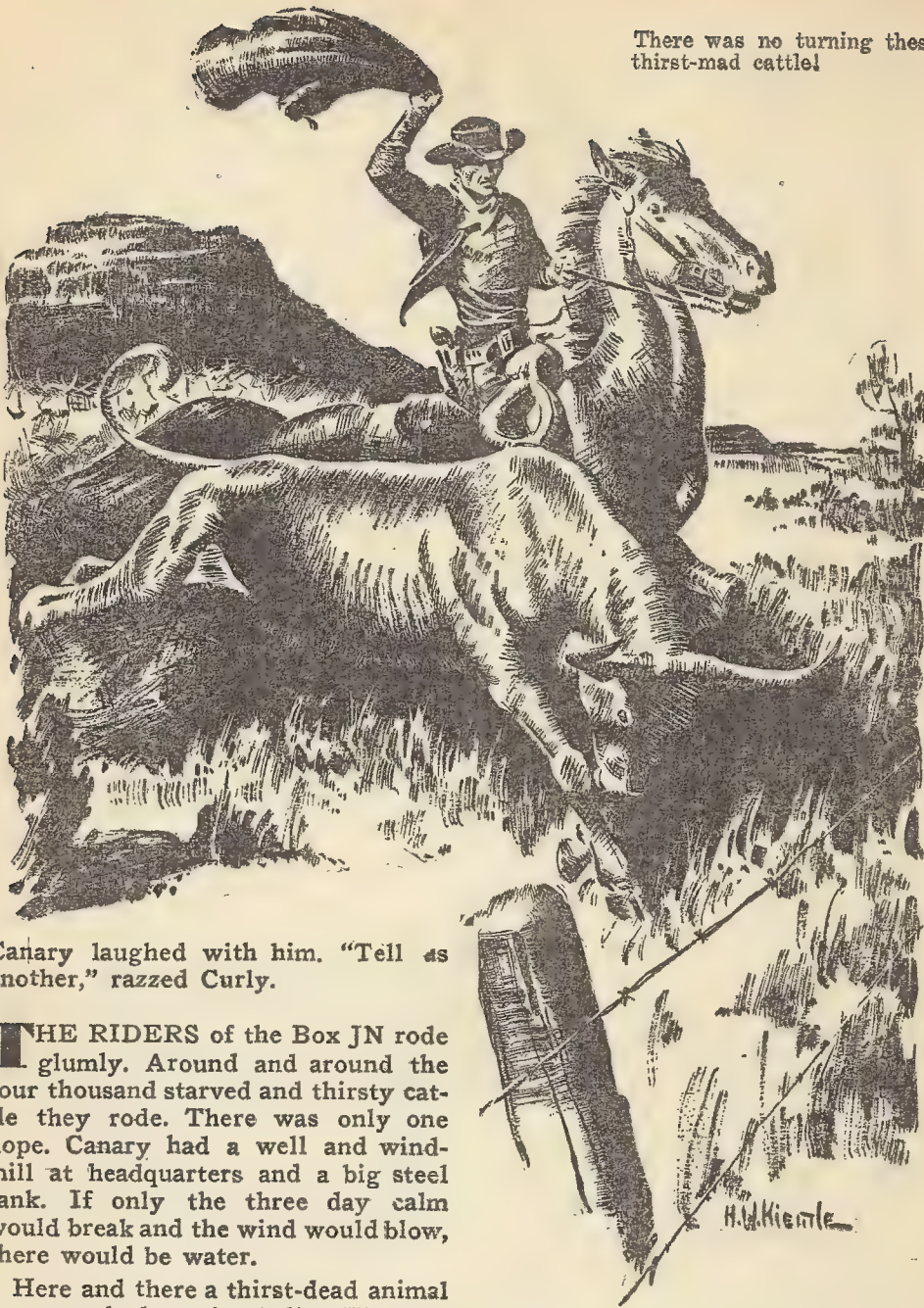
The shade of those trees nursed the little stream along until it crossed the quarter of a mile strip still owned by the Gutierrez heirs, so that it reached Canary's portion. There he had dug a tank and puddled it; there was a good supply for his four thousand cattle. Southward spread many sections of gramma grass that still belonged to Uncle Sam. Northward beyond Skeery's holdings where the rockwall opened, lay other and larger grasslands of open government range.

It was plain what Skeery had done. He had not only cut Canary from the free land to the north; he had burned the southern range and ruined his waterhole. Only sober-headed Canary held the Box JN riders in check. They were boiling mad; they wanted to whip fire with fire.

"It'd do us no good," Canary coun-cilled. "It'd even do us harm. We might dicker with him to let us push on through the gap."

Doughbait, the big rawboned oldster of the riders, laughed outright.

There was no turning these
thirst-mad cattle!



Canary laughed with him. "Tell us another," razed Curly.

THE RIDERS of the Box JN rode glumly. Around and around the four thousand starved and thirsty cattle they rode. There was only one hope. Canary had a well and windmill at headquarters and a big steel tank. If only the three day calm would break and the wind would blow, there would be water.

Here and there a thirst-dead animal lay stretched on its belly. Through the dust that hung over the herd Canary could see Red Lake glistening under the sun. Water was there, plenty of water, protected only by Skeery's barbed wire fence.

"Better push 'em back a little,"

Canary ordered. "If them critters get a whiff of that water, hell's gates won't hold 'em."

About mid-afternoon Skeery came riding through the south gate. With him were twenty armed men. "Shore

bad," he said loudly as he rode up. "Wisht I knew the low down son of a rattlesnake what done it. Shore bad."

Canary laid out a paper for a new quirly along his fingers, opened the sack of Bull Durham makings. "How come you ridin' my range?"

"Might make a offer for 'em," answered Skeery.

"You boys better ride," growled Canary.

About nightfall Josh Scoggins rode out. He drew rein on the span of Kansas bred geldings, as he sat in the buckboard waiting for Canary to ride up. Canary took his time. He wanted to think. What influence did Skeery have with Josh Scoggins bank? Maybe none at all he admitted. He knew Scoggins had come about the note. Skeery could have prodded him; any bank would worry about paper on cattle without a waterhole, especially when they were ranging on burnt over grass.

"Better sell," Scoggins said as Canary drew rein and swung one leg around the saddle horn. "I don't like to say this, Canary, because I know how you must feel. But there ain't no other way out. I'll give you two days. Yore note's past due, you know."

Canary tossed his cigarette to the dust. He watched Scoggins face grow red as he squirmed under his gaze. "Send Skeery back," he said, "I know when my throat's cut."

There was nothing else he could do. There wasn't another place with surplus grass in driving range, and the critters were terribly ganted. True the government range north of Skeery's fence was as much his as Skeery's, but there was a state law which forbade one running cattle unless he had water. Skeery's fence cut Canary from the open range north.

"That old bloodsucker'll take 'em if I don't sell," he said to Curly as they tailed up a cow, only to have her flop down again. "He'll jest call that paper, then drive 'em through that gate." He raised his voice, "Dough-

bait! Ride over and tell the old range hog I want to see him."

SKEERY CAME again with his twenty men. They grouped their horses and watched as Skeery and Canary dickered about a price. Curly, Doughbait, and the other Box JN waddies had tough riding to keep the herd together, they were that dry. The sun blazed down from a cloudless sky. Silver saddle-horns felt like branding irons. Red dust raised from chousing horses and milling cows burned the nostrils and caked the throat.

An hour Canary bargained, then he sold, cash on the barrel head, signing a bill of sale with two of Skeery's men as witnesses. There was enough to pay Scoggins with a thousand left for himself. Curly rode up. "Damn if I'd do it," he bawled out his voice choking, "Them critters 'd brought a hundred around last spring."

"We got a thousand to grow on," cracked Canary, "Maybe buy a engine and build a new dirt tank."

"An' raise mule rabbits," groaned Curly.

"Pass the word," commanded Canary, "I promised to put 'em on Skeery's grass."

Curly rode away. Canary wheeled his buckskin pony around. He was broke; he hadn't a critter to his name. It was a queer feeling. He'd never known the Box JN spread without a hoof to graze it. It was something he didn't want to think about, so he began to sing an old song he and the waddies sang on stormy nights when they rode slowly bedding down the herd. It went like this:

*"Parson, I'm a maverick, just run-
nin' loose an' grazin',
Eatin' where's th' greenest grass
an' drinkin' where I choose:
Had to rustle in my youth an'
never had no raisin':
Wasn't never halter broke an' I
ain't much to lose."*

Skeery and his men rode hard to get ahead of the herd so they could

take them over once they were through the gate. Canary paid them no mind. There were four thousand hot, dusty, and gaunted cattle to move and Canary knew it wasn't going to be any cinch. The thirsty critters were already making a din of noise to burst his ears. He galloped after a panicky steer and turned it back.

Slowly he and his men pushed the herd along. Some of them were ready to bolt and some could hardly move at all. Many were already stretched belly to earth. In the lead there were a thousand thirst ganted but blooded steers, big fellows with short thick horns and white curly faces. They became spooked as a dust devil swung into them with circling tumbleweeds and litter. A big bull lifted his curly forehead above the rump of his neighbor. It sniffed eagerly, then gave a queer excited bawl. A hundred steers began to follow as it loped off toward Red Lake. Canary rode hard to head them, untying his slicker from the saddle as he rode. By then the lead was loping in headlong flight. A thousand poured after the lead, and behind them another thousand caught the scent of water and thundered after.

Canary shook out the slicker as he neared the big bull now a couple of horselengths ahead of the thousands that followed. Canary rode in to turn him, bawling his loudest and slapping the slicker right and left.

The bull didn't turn. He lowered his head and charged determinedly. At the fence the buckskin slid to a stop. The bull charged through sending the taut wires coiling across the blackened grass roots.

Canary followed through the gap with the herd close after; their dust brown backs lifting and falling like oncoming water, their horns like white spray flashing from the flood.

SKEERY'S bunch scattered. Frightened by the uproar Skeery's horse piled him. By the time he could remount, he was cut off. He

rode like a tenderfoot toward the home corral. Canary shouted for him to ride left, but the bawling brutes raised the roar of a tornado. There was only one chance to save Skeery, or the herd. That was to turn the lead, to swing that big bull around and start them milling. He reached the bull again, swinging the slicker. The bull lowered his head and charged on. Canary drew his six gun and sent the fellow rolling. He crowded against the next big steer; it was no good. By then Doughbait had joined him.

Canary rode low, peering through the dust cloud. He could see nothing ahead. He hoped Skeery had cleared them, but he wasn't sure. He turned about in his saddle to shout at Doughbait. "Let 'em go!" he yelled, "Get out of it. They're too dry. They won't turn. They smell water!" He swung his arms to indicate Doughbait was to ride for it. He knew there was no chance to turn that thirsty, desperate herd with the scent of water in their nostrils. To turn a stampede of spooked cattle was one thing, to keep those thirst dying cattle from the lake just couldn't be done.

There was one more job to do. That was to give Doughbait a chance. He used the slicker and his gun to crowd the flow back. Doughbait got free. Canary tried to follow. By then running brutes pressed both sides, loping horns razed his legs, dust kicked into his eyes. He was caught in a torrent no horse could break. He could only ride with them, hoping for something he couldn't guess what.

Down the arroyo was unburned grass. The dust thinned as the herd swung straight now, for the lake. He could see it not two hundred yards ahead, glittering in the sunlight.

The steers saw it, too, and bawled louder as they quickened their run. He tightened rein. Every impulse in him was to hold back from that water which he knew was fifteen feet deep. The herd pushed him on, but some were moving ahead of him. As the dust thinned he saw Skeery again

caught near the lead. He was lying flat against the saddle horn, shaking with panic. And the lake moved up swiftly, and no way to stop it.

The low branches of the cottonwood trees scratched off Canary's big Stetson. Overhead were bare blackened trees, many burned clean of leaf, holding out charred, amputated limbs, to curse Skeery's accomplishment.

The lead steers hit the lake, tried to halt to put down their heads and drink. Those behind pushed them on, down, down, out of sight, until more and more piled in to be trampled and drowned.

Skeery lifted his pale, frightened face, turned about to scream. His eyes were bugging. His mouth gaped. Then he slid down over the saddle horn as his horse stumbled, struggled a moment, then was buried under the brown tide.

Canary was moving in more slowly now, hauling on the reins with both hands. Yet that turbulent water seemed to run for him. And the bawling, senseless brutes pushed on to their death.

"Guess it's a draw," he muttered, "Skeery an' me'll cancel out."

HE DUCKED as another low limb scratched at his face. Two horselengths away the lake was swallowing thirsty cattle. If the brutes had sense, they'd stop. "Mebbe the Boss Rider might say that of me," he thought. "Mebbe if I had the savvy, I could get out. Mebbe I could scramble across atop 'em?" But he knew that wouldn't work.

He took a looksee for Curly and Doughbait. They were riding hard, still trying to help him, but they were outside the crush. He could hear the crack of their guns as they tried to shoot him free.

His eyes lifted skyward and he saw the charred amputated limbs of the cottonwood trees. *Dirty work*, he thought, *but it got him, too. Gonna even up some for me, I guess.* Then

it hit him. Those limbs. He could dab a rope on one of them easier than he could forefoot a calf. He dragged up his rope, loosened it from the saddle horn, built a small loop, and dabbed it over a big stob high overhead.

The rope tightened in his hand, dragged him up over the saddle atop the buckskin's rump. He climbed hand over hand his dangling feet buffeted by the horns of the herd as they rushed on taking the buckskin with them.

He climbed slowly, twisting his legs about the trailing rope. He caught the charred stump and swung a leg over it, and sat waiting for the herd to pass.

It took four hundred head to fill the lake so that the herd could keep their heads above water. Canary hated to watch them die. They were good stuff. With that north range they would fatten before fall.

Curly and Doughbait and the other Box JN waddies rounded up the herd and drove them north to grass. Skeery's gunmen had ridden off without leaving an address.

Canary swung to the ground. One of the buttons rode back to the ranch and returned with a saddled horse. By then the cattle were grazing on the north range. Having nothing else to do the waddies rode on into town with Canary who wanted to pay off the mortgage on the cattle he had sold.

"Here's the mazuma to cancel that mortgage," Canary said coldly as he stopped beside Scoggins roll top desk. "Them cattle stampeded. Smelled water. Skeery'd been alive yet if he'd let us water 'em a day or so sooner."

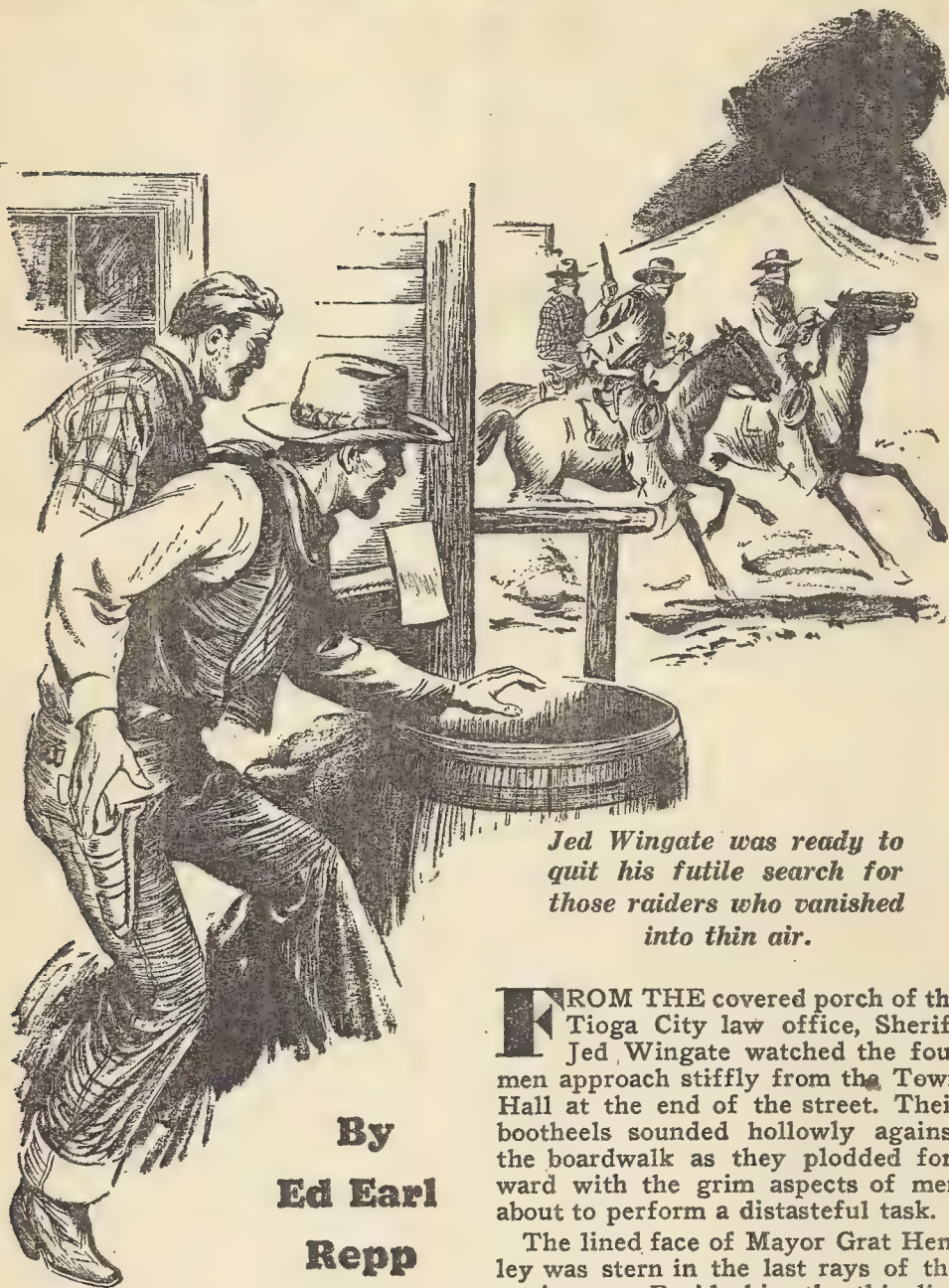
"What's that? What you say?"

"Dead," growled Canary, "Most made it a pair if his fire hadn't done a pretty good job."

Scoggins wasn't interested in Canary's escape. "That makes a hell of a mix-up," he moaned, "Worse'n a buttermilk wagon in a runaway. If Skee-

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Renegades Die Alone



Jed Wingate was ready to quit his futile search for those raiders who vanished into thin air.

By
**Ed Earl
Repp**

FROM THE covered porch of the Tioga City law office, Sheriff Jed Wingate watched the four men approach stiffly from the Town Hall at the end of the street. Their bootheels sounded hollowly against the boardwalk as they plodded forward with the grim aspects of men about to perform a distasteful task.

The lined face of Mayor Grat Henley was stern in the last rays of the setting sun. Beside him the thin lips of his flashily-garbed brother-in-law, Fancy Oliver, were set in a tight line. As chairman of the Council he held Tioga City in the palm of his white,

long-fingered hands. His tall, blocky body jerked with each mincing step he made and his thin, predatory nose wheezed as he breathed.

Jed didn't like Oliver. His very aspect made the sheriff's hackles crawl at the base of his leathery neck. And there was Clip Cudlow, another hanger-on at the town hall. He was a gossiping, good-for-nothing type of man who had a finger in everything profitable that went on.

Digging deeper into his bullhide chair, Jed awaited their approach, taking deep draws that made the cigar in his mouth wink. He needed no one to inform him why the Tioga leaders were headed this way. His temper mounted like a thermometer and his square chin set belligerently. His lean face, weathered by countless suns and storms, took on a flinty hardness.

The mayor planted himself solidly before him. "You can't have overlooked it, Jed," he said flatly, "but all of Tioga City is either cussing you outright or laughing behind your back. It's high time you did something about it."

Ponderously, Jed shifted his weight swept the four with a milk-eyed glance. He liked Grate Henley, a small town politician, but honest. Cudlow was his private investigator, a trouble-shooter of sorts. Jed simply tolerated Oliver and let it go at that. The fourth man, Parson Dean, had peculiar characteristics for a man of the cloth, the sheriff calculated. He was a burly man, fitting snugly in his box coat and striped trousers. His smiling graciousness could change to cold mercilessness at the flick of an eye. But Jed allowed every man his peculiarities so long as they obeyed the law of Tioga.

"Them that's cussin' me," Jed's voice was deep, convincing, "are ridin' with the law. The others are just plumb scared of me!"

"The time for such speculation is long passed, sheriff," Dean said. "Now we need action. To quote the scripture—leap upon those would rob you of your worldly goods!"

Jed's pale eyes narrowed. "That so, Parson?" he gave back. "Funny—I

musta skipped up on that one."

"He means," Grate cleared his throat noisily, "that those five longriders that've been raiding this town have got to be taken. I know you've combed this country bald for 'em, but you've lost their trails at every turn. And you used to be able to track a lizard across scabrock, Jed—in your younger days. You ought to be out huntin' sign right now instead of keeping your easy chair warm. We thought—"

Jed's temper skyrocketed. He came to his feet, rising over the mayor like a sturdy old oak. "So you thought, eh?" he bit out. "I'd like to know what with!"

"Now wait a minute, Jed," Grate held up his palms, but there was no halting the fiery old law dog once his hackles were up.

"Wait nothin'!" Jed gave back. "I'm tellin' it scary right back at you. Them longriders have been vanishin' into thin air an' I ain't got wings! Understand? I've been takin' this town's insults long enough. For twenty years I've kept Tioga City a safe, decent place to live in. I've been wine'd an' dine'd an' presented with gold badges for bravery so many times I got a trunk full! They forget fast, Henley—too fast for me!"

Furiously he yanked the badge from his vest as the mayor said: "Don't be hasty, Jed. I was just goin' to suggest a young fella to help out as your deputy."

Jed snorted. "I never needed any help," he said. "I don't need it now. Give the youngster my badge an' let him sprout the wings a man needs to run that gang down." He tossed his badge at their feet.

"It was me that suggested help for you, sheriff," the parson volunteered. "I'm only serving my congregation. Your office needs young blood."

Jed's eyes bit into him like gimlets. "Then keep on servin' 'em," he said flatly. "First tough problem that comes along an' they ain't got time for me to work out the answers!"

"We wasn't aimin' to remove you," said Oliver.

"I'm beatin' you to the punch," snapped Jed. "I'm steppin' down of

my own accord. The parson here, came along an' brought the wrath o' Scriptures with him. Let his preachin' an' some young button flush that gang. My lights are flickerin' low just now, but there's still fire in the old stove yet. Good night!"

He shoved his way through them, elbowing Oliver and Cudlow roughly aside and headed straight for the Tioga Bar, his slab-muscled form blocking splashes of light guttering from windows as he passed.

"He's got a temper like a dynamite cap," said Grat moresely, and picked up the badge. He hadn't liked what had happened, not in the least. A finer lawman had never pinned on a badge, he knew, than Jed Wingate. But perhaps the oldster's fires were burning low—too low for the task the mysterious longriders had set for him.

TIOGA City no longer laughed at Jed Wingate. It was not a safe practice to indulge in. The explosive ex-sheriff was avoided with the same caution a man might use in handling dynamite. He kept mostly to himself at his favorite spot at the end of the Tioga Bar, drinking moderately, but with deliberate purpose. His eyes were chilly and bleak now and each face that came before them was probed minutely.

Frequently he rode out of town on brief, unexplained missions. Sometimes his horse was splashed from riding the bosque of Grey Bull Creek. When he returned, he was more morose, taciturn than before. He spoke little, but listened more. New lines began to etch the sides of his fine mouth and his leonine head became more gray.

After one attempt to pacify the former lawman, Mayor Henley remained aloof. And Jed avoided the official like a dog that had been kicked for being friendly. Tioga City, at first assuming his retirement would be a driving force that would compel him to solve the mystery, turned its attention to his successor—young Tug Clements. Jed Wingate soon became a forgotten man.

Then in one month the mysterious band of masked raiders struck twice.

Once at Wells-Fargo and then at the Tioga City Bank. The town screamed for justice and organized a vigilante committee. At the far end of the main street, under the shade of the cottonwoods lining Grey Bull Creek, Parson Dean invoked maledictions on the raiders who shot without hesitation and never failed to leave a few corpses for the undertaker, always unfortunate citizens who happened to be in their way.

Tug Clements grew gaunt with worry, and Jed drank more heavily. No one paid much attention to him until one day Tioga was handed something to talk about beside the outlaws. Jed Wingate had gotten religion! Each afternoon at three he left his favorite spot in the Tioga Bar and ambled down to Parson Dean's big congregational tent, dropped on one of the long benches and listened to what the sky pilot had to say.

JED WAS a little tighter than usual this day. His booted feet kept feeling and kicking about in the sawdust covering the floor of the Parson's tent. Frequently he almost fell from the bench, toppling forward on his hands and slowly regaining his perch. Now he paid little attention to what Dean had to say. The Parson grasped the opportunity to make an example of him as a drunkard.

"My bretheren," he shouted, "there sits a man looked upon as a disgrace to Tioga City. At one time he was a respectable citizen, a man of position and means. Today, because of his lack of will power, he has fallen on evil ways. Satan is preparing him for the heat of hell. Each drink he swallows takes him closer and closer to the devil! Every thought in his whiskey-befuddled mind makes the flames of the Inferno blaze higher to consume him. I tell you, my friends, Jed Wingate is a doomed man. Let his degradation be a burning lesson to you all. The road to salvation and redemption is long. Let us pray for him!"

Jed Wingate bowed his shaggy head and sent his hand between his legs to trace a deep pattern in the sawdust. When the prayer was finished he lumbered unsteadily to his

feet and made his way up town. And strangely he walked straight. It might have been the cool wind lifting from the creek bosque that revived him. You couldn't tell by his face. His lips were a taut line, eyes veiled by narrowed lids. He went directly to Mayor Henley's office. Grat looked up in astonishment when his big frame loomed in the doorway.

"Why, howdy, Jed," he said affably. "Come in an' sit down."

But Jed disregarded his invitation and remained fixed in the portal.

"I would like you to do something for me, Henley," he said tersely. "Yes or no!"

Henley blinked. "Sure, sure, Jed," he said. "But first I'd like to know what it is."

"I want you to pass word around that a big consignment of gold is comin' n to the bank tomorrow from the mines in the Washakie River country," Jed replied. "I want you to assign two men to me that can be trusted, an' have 'em stake out behind the deserted shack at the creek. Have 'em fetch axes an' side guns. Will you do it?"

The mayor's eyes widened, then a frown clamped over his brow as he studied the former sheriff. "That's quite unusual, Jed," he gulped. "Tell me—"

"Will you string along or not?" Jed clipped sullenly.

"Well, ah, you see—" Henley stammered. "Tell me what you're up to first an' maybe we can talk business."

The ex-lawman's face flushed beneath his tan. "I'm not sayin' a thing—but this—" he bit out. "I've got good reasons for wantin' those raiders to ride tomorrow. Grat, I never made a threat to you before, but you can take this any way you like. Don't repeat a word I said—to anyone. If you do—" Then he was turning from the door and Henley heard his heels clump down the corridor to the street.

Fancy Oliver, coming in, turned to look, but Jed ignored him. He hurried to the mayor's office. "Was Wingate in here?" he asked.

Henley nodded. "Yeah," he said. "That is, somewhat."

"What did he want?" Oliver was

curious. "Drinkin' money?"

"He's havin' the tremens," muttered Henley. "It's the rot gut he's been guzzlin'."

CLIP CUDLOW was chalking his cue in Hen Carson's Pool Room when Jed walked in. "Hullo, Jed!" Cudlow greeted, surprised. "The Tioga gettin' on your nerves? Have a drink."

Jed shook his head. "Got to give my stomach time to catch up on the last one, Clip," he said. "Religion is doin' things to me. It's like that. Heard the news?"

The gossip Cudlow became all ears. "Why no," he said. "What's up?"

"Heard talk about the mines up Washakie way sendin' a gold shipment to the bank here tomorrow," Jed explained. "Ain't very smart, are they—with that gang of longriders around."

"If you ask me, they're plump loco," Cudlow said, and racked his cue. "See you later, Jed. Just remembered I got to see a gent on official business." Smiling grimly, Jed watched him go, then he trudged back to the Tioga Bar to put his finger on the pulse of the town. In no time the town had the news. The gang was certain to strike again. There were condemnations and cursing by the less fearless over the way most of the vigilante committee suddenly had pressing business to attend to elsewhere. Jed stood at the end of the bar and chuckled inwardly.

AT SUNDOWN the next day, when the Washakies were em-purpling with evening shadows, Jed Wingate was still at his post in the Tioga. Nor did he betray any deeper signs of inebriation than he had before. He just stood there, toying with his glass, watching the changing light outside. When the gold fused with the velvet twilight, he hitched himself erect and turned to the bartender.

"Bottles," he said. "Hand me my guns."

The menial spread his hands on the mahogany. "What for, Jed?" he asked narrowly. "Your fires kindlin' again?"

Jed shrugged. The bartender caught some of the iciness within him. He had felt it before. Without further argument he handed the guns over to him, snug in their smooth-draw holsters. The loops of the cartridge belt were filled.

With a sort of detached attitude, Jed belted on his twin Colts and tied down the holsters. Then he was limbering his arms and hands. Like diving bullbats his hands swooped down and came up filled and ready to deal out sudden death. The bartender grunted in admiration; time hadn't dulled the ex-lawman's gun-swift. It hadn't dulled anything about him. He walked out, shoulders squared chin jutting at an aggressive angle.

He went straight to the blacksmith shop. The burly iron-bender turned from his forge and his brows went up when he saw Jed's tied-hard guns.

"I want to borrow a sharp, double-bit axe for a spell, Jake," Jed's voice was low.

The blacksmith's brows went even higher. "What for, Jed?" he asked. "Ain't no trees around here worth loggin'."

Jed eyed him intently. "Was a time, Jake," he said, "when I wasn't questioned in this town for my wants. But since everybody thinks I'm a no-good, washed up lawdog, I can't lift a finger or speak a word without havin' to answer some blasted questions. Sorry I bothered you."

He turned away. The smithy's big hand shot out, spun him around. A chuckle rumbled inside Jake's huge frame. "You can't fool me, Jed," he said. "You're up to somethin' or you wouldn't be freightin' your guns. It's your askin' for an axe that stumped me. Jed, you know I used to be champon tree-faller when we logged this strip years ago. Count me in to swing again."

Kindredness sprang between them. Each understood the other. It's that way with strong men. Jed's shoulders went back again.

"You're the first man that's offered a hand in a long time, Jake," he said. "There'll be shootin' a-plenty. You've got kids."

Jake laughed, his voice brittle.

"Sure I got kids!" he said. "They wouldn't think much of me if I coyot-ed out of trouble. I better fetch a gun, too."

He tossed his apron aside as he stepped back into the shop. When he returned a moment later, the gun looked small tucked in his expansive waist. He carried a bright new axe and held it up proudly. "Made it myself, Jed," he murmured. "Could shave with either blade. Balanced perfectly for anything from fellin' trees to beheadin' any ornery jasper that needs it."

Jed knew the smithy's handiwork with metals and wood. He'd shaped the manacles in the sheriff's office.

"What do we do tonight, Jed?" Jake was at his side, ready.

Jed told him, in a gushing torrent of words whispered softly. He finished with: "I'm makin' it my last job for Tioga City," he said. "Twenty years of sheriffin' has wore me down. Three months of boozin', thinkin', an' listenin' to a hypocrite is more than any man can't take. It'll end tonight. Tug Clements will find Tioga City a mighty quiet place come tomorrow—an' welcome to the thankless badge he wears."

Jake clapped him on the back enthusiastically. "How'd you ever find it out, Jed?" he said. "You sure must've been workin' like always these last months. But after you pull this job, the town'll never let you go."

"I'm gone!" the ex-lawman countered. "They forgot my services. But there's just some things a man has to clear up before he quits. If that gang hadn't dealt me so much misery, I wouldn't be riskin' my skin tonight—so young Tug can have clear sailin' in the future."

THEY WALKED into the increasing darkness behind the blacksmith shop. Swift strides took them down the alley to a position behind the deserted shack. Across from them Parson Dean's gospel tent squatted like a dark hump along the creek bank.

Tioga City was weirdly silent. The only animation on the street were a couple of saddle horses in front of

the pool room. Window blinds were drawn and the town kept indoors expectantly. The gang was sure to strike—with all that gold lying in the bank. Then it happened.

Hoof thunder came from the bosque of Grey Bull Creek. Jed's hand clutched Jake's muscle-knotted shoulder. "They'll be comin' just like I figured," he whispered.

A band of five riders swept boldly past the shack. Jake slid out his gun. "Hold it!" Jed said. The blacksmith replaced the weapon and took a firmer grip on his axe.

The masked renegades roared boldly up to the bank, four of the five fanning out and throwing a rapid fire along the street. The shatter of window glass was brittle and bell-like. The gunfire was designed to cover the fifth man who shot away the door locks and went inside to plunder.

Now they were riding back, the five of them, plunging recklessly into the bed of the creek. Splashing sounds died out abruptly.

"Let's go!" Jed leaped from cover, Jake right beside him. Citizens appeared magically, running toward them. Jed and the smithy ignored their shouts and raced for Parson Dean's tent. Like a rail-splitter, Jake swung his axe at the guy-ropes of the big tent, severing them as if he were brushing cobwebs aside. Jed had his knife out and working, sawing through the tethers.

The mayor and a group of townsmen puffed up. "What the devil are you doin', Wingate?" Henley demanded. "You're destroyin' private property. Have you gone completely berserk?"

"Get out of the way!" Jed bellowed at him. "You wouldn't help. You're no good to me now. Stand back!"

He grunted as he pulled his blade through a rope. The canvas structure wobbled and writhed ghost-like in the eerie light. Then it folded and fell. Henley's mouth flew open and snapped shut as the squeels of frightened horses came through the canvas. The tent became a mass of crawling humps. Men cursed and shouted.

"Come out from under there, sky-pilot!" Jed bellowed. "And come peaceful!"

One of the trapped longriders tore a hole through the canvas and came out shooting and gasping for breath. Jed's quick shot struck him down. Mayor Henley gasped. It was his brother-in-law, Fancy Oliver. Then Jed and the blacksmith were charging across the writhing canvas, their gun barrels rising and falling upon the heads of the remaining renegades outlined clearly beneath it. Tug Clements rushed up.

"What's goin' on here, Wingate?" he demanded.

"Your mysterious raiders are suffocatin' under this canvas, sheriff," Jed told him. "We'd best haul 'em out so they can stand trail. You'll find Parson Dean, Clip Cudlow, Gabe McCloud an' Hen Carson under there. Had to trigger Fancy Oliver. They're all local gents but the Parson. He sure converted them galoots into an outlaw congregation!"

Tug looked at him incredulously for an instant and then went to work with the help of Jed and Jake and some townsmen. Grate Henley had vanished, embarrassed by the expose of Oliver's outlaw connections.

WHEN TIOGA City turned out to praise Jed Wingate at the Tioga Bar at midnight, it was Mayor Grate Henley who led a committee of four new councilmen up to the ex-sheriff.

"The town's for you, Jed," he said, and pinned a bright new gold badge on his chest. "You did us a service we can never repay, even if you had to kill my own brother-in-law. He had it coming."

A gold-plated gun was thrust into Jed's hand, inscribed with the town's gratitude. For a long moment he stood there, moisture welling in his eyes. His hand stole up to feel the emblem of law and order on his vest.

"How'd you figure it all out, Jed?" asked Sam Stockton, newly-appointed City Father.

"Like playin' checkers," muttered Jed absently. "Trouble didn't start for Tioga until the Parson set up

his tent by the creek. When I was stripped of my badge I had a chance to sit back an' study—like an outsider watching a checker game. He can always spot the moves before the players. Suspected it was an inside job after failin' to find the trail of that gang. Then I had a hunch Clip Cudlow was the source of information.

"The Parson kept misquotin' the Scriptures too often to be a regular minister. I went to his gospel meetin's every day to examine his set-up closely. One day I dug deep in the sawdust an' felt a horseshoe. You all know that place wasn't built over an old corral. I scraped a hole in the canvas floorin' beneath the sawdust and found fresh horse tracks! Then I knew.

"By actin' drunk, my eyes roamed around that tent an' seen where it had flaps near the trees along the creek. Those renegades were hidin' their trails in the creek, raidin' town, gettin' back into the creek an' into the tent! Then while we organized a posse an' lit out after 'em, they'd hold the muzzles of their broncs until we'd gone. Then they'd slip their horses out, smooth out the sawdust an' be ready for the next day's meetin'. It was simple as that, gents."

"We're all mighty grateful," said Henley. "The folks of Tioga City want you to return to office. We've

also started to collect money to build you a new jail."

Jed's face flamed and his eyes ignited with temper. "That so?" he cracked out. "Well, you're saddlin' the wrong horse. I served my hitch. I've left the office clean for Tug Clements. He's a good lad, with a reputation to build like when I started out. You're all for me now. Come something tough to crack an' you'll be against me. No, thanks. I don't want the job. I'm through."

"But we all thought—" Henley swallowed hard.

"I still don't know what with!" scoured Jed. "You're bestowin' cheers on me an' forgettin' Jake Larabee, the blacksmith, the only man willin' to lend me a hand in smashin' that gang. An' you're willin' to strip the badge off young Tug, to boot. Go home an' look in your mirrors an' see if you can find anything square in 'em!" He thrust the inscribed gun back into Henley's hands, removed the gold badge and hung it on his coat sleeve, shoved thought the gathering and was gone.

"No fool like an' old fool," remarked Stocktin disappointedly.

"He's the smartest man in this town," mumbled Henley. Then he was following the path left by Jed Wingate, his face stern. And all of Tioga City went home, sobered and thoughtful. Jed had given them something to think about.



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Down That Longrider Trail

By Art Kercheval

Lee Sandlin's life was botched now. Why should he risk it now for the sake of the law he had once flouted?

LEE SANDLIN whirled at the sound of a soft step beside him. He stared at the man coming toward him. Danny Hook was grinning and he had a Colt in his hand. "Go ahead, water yourself and horse, Lee," Danny said. "Don't let me stop you."

Lee said nothing, hearing the clamor of his wheeling thoughts. That was the only sound he heard now here by this silent lake in the mountains.

"Couldn't take any chances," the small-statured convict told Lee. "First, I let you in on my plans, because you seemed like a right hombre. We aimed to bust out of stir together, meet up with Boot Clawson and really go places. Then the warden makes a trusty out of you—and I hafta cut you out. Climb aboard your nag, Lee Sandlin; we'll see what Boot has to say."

They mounted and rode. Lee broke his silence, saying what was obvious, "So you busted out alone."

"Just six hours after the prison grapevine had it that old Ainsworth had picked you for his fair-haired boy. Had to knock a stable guard in the head to get this horse and gun and change of clothes. Ran a sandy on 'em at the gates, then, though it took some tall ridin' and shootin' to lose 'em in the timber."

Lee nodded brittlely. "So you killed again, Danny," he remarked slowly.

"I heard hoofbeats on the read, saw it was you, and waited till daylight to ride up to you," Danny went on, ignoring the remark. "You were a chump for pullin' out on me, Lee right after we had our plans laid. I've known trusties that spent their life in stir."

Lee nodded again, secretly wondering if maybe Danny wasn't right. After all, what was there to gain by being a trusty, except a few more privileges? Except when duties took him outside, like this one, he was still behind cold gray walls. But old Sam

DOWN THAT LONGRIDER TRAIL

Ainsworth, the warden, had painted a pretty picture.

"Sandlin, I've been watching you," Ainsworth had said. "You've been here for six months, and all that time you haven't been in a bit of trouble. As assistant to Doc Courtney, your work has been excellent. Maybe I'm an old fool, but I've decided to take a chance on you, something we don't ordinarily do in so short a period of time. Sandlin, I'm making you a trusty."

Lee Sandlin had been too flabbergasted to speak.

"Quite often, your duties will take you beyond the prison walls," the warden had explained. "Tonight, after supper, I want you to make a ride, to Wolf Springs. There'll be a saddled horse ready in the stables. I have a letter that must reach Sheriff Longmire without delay, and I have no one else available to make the trip."

AS THEY rode into the chill heights of the Picket Pin Mountains, Lee pressed his hand against his shirt now, feeling the letter. Many times, during the night, he'd had an urge to break the red sealing-wax, open the letter and read it. He decided suddenly, if he had another chance, he would satisfy that curiosity.

He swore silently at his fate, recalling bitterly the greatest mistake of his life. Cleaning stables or swamping saloons or even punching cows had seemed a long process to acquire the money Lee so desperately desired. More than anything in the world, he wanted to go to college and learn how to be a doctor. That saloon safe had appeared to be his answer. But like many an amateur, a masked and gun-sprouting Lee had bungled and was caught and sent to the pen.

There, eventually, he'd met Danny Hook, a lifer, and little by little Danny had taken him into his confidence. Lee learned Danny had some big ideas about a series of robberies he wanted to tell his old outlaw pal, Boot Clawson, and Lee was now

(Continued On Page 88)

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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

(Continued From Page 87)

twistedly as he gestured with the gun.

Lee walked forward. Danny was brought into the deal. What had he to lose by throwing in with them? His life was already messed up. So Lee played the good boy, waiting the time Danny had set for the "break." It wasn't so hard to do, because he was soon assigned to assist the prison doctor and he became so absorbed in his work that he almost forgot Danny.

They rode up within sight of the weathered shack and halted and Danny ordered him down. "You first, my dear amigo." Danny grinned hollering, presently, "It's me, Boot—Danny Hook!" and getting an answering "Come ahead!" from the shack. Lee was prodded inside. Sudden warmth hit him—warmth from a stove somewhere to the left of him. He stopped and stared at the big man standing in the room. This would be Boot Clawson. Danny had described him many times. A tall, broad man, who faced him now in a challenging stance, hand clamping gun butt, Clawson tallied many bank robberies and killings to his record and had never been in prison.

"So," Clawson said, "it's Danny Hook come back. What's the idea of the gun against this gent, Hook?"

"I wanted somebody to help me on the break," Danny explained. "Boot, I got ideas—big ideas. Just like the old days, when we used to work together. But we have to blow this country fast first, because they're hot after me. I figured we could use a guy like this in our business. He wants to be a doc and he knows all about medicine. If we got any holes in our hides, he coulda plugged 'em up for us. But—"

"Start makin' sense, Hook." Clawson said it levelly.

Danny licked his lips. "Hell, Boot, it didn't pan out that way. We was all set to pull it off, when Sandlin got other ideas."

"Such as?" Clawson's eyes were measuring Lee. Lee stood there and thought he read his fate in them.

"The warden makes a trusty out of him!" Danny snarled. "Can you tie that? And him practically a new-

DOWN THAT LONGRIDER TRAIL

comer! Yeah, and it goes to Handsome's head and his old pal ain't good enough for him anymore. Lee Sandlin swells out his chest and says he's gonna serve his time, then ride the straight and narrow!"

CLAWSOON ignored Danny now. He turned and faced Lee squarely, his hand still riding his gun. Lee thought, *This is it. There's no escape. I shouldn't have backed out on Danny, when I had this opportunity to get my hands on some big money. Trusty... what the hell? Cheap freedom at best. I wonder if it's too late now to play the game their way?*

Clawson spat. He said, "So the trusty's gettin' himself some fresh air and exercise. What might be the errand the warden's sendin' you on?" A glint of suspicion showed in his eyes.

Lee said, "I'm to see a man." That was, he decided, all the information they'd get out of him. He thought of the letter inside his shirt and hoped they wouldn't decide to search him.

"So Hook told you some big plans, huh?" Clawson went on, slowly. "Maybe or maybe not Hook was a damn fool for that. Sandlin, as it stands, you're a dangerous man to me. You know too much, of course, for me to let you go, because if the country's too hot for Danny it's too hot for me. Danny and me'll be headin' south, maybe to carry out them big ideas. However, as Danny says, maybe we could use a doctor in our business. It ain't your fault the warden makes a trusty out of you, and maybe you're still a right jasper at heart. I'll give you a chance to ride with us. Ride with us, or die. That's the ticket; which side the fence you on?"

Cold sweat broke out on Lee, and he shifted his feet. Here it was for him, cut-and-dried. Clawson didn't bluff. Here it was, he told himself, the thing he'd asked for. Clawson would still take him in. Clawson would teach him all the tricks, so Lee wouldn't be a bungling amateur and get caught. Weigh that against years of serving time, and only a fool would string along with a gent like

(Continued On Page 90)

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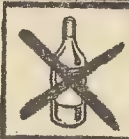
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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

(Continued From Page 89)

Ainsworth. And they didn't come any better, either, than old Sam. Lee swallowed deep.

He knew what would happen if he should refuse. No, he wouldn't have a chance to fight his way out of this. They didn't give trusties guns. Give Clawson the wrong answer now, and Clawson would slide his gun from his holster. The shack would rock with splitting roar and Lee Sandlin would be dead.

"Which is it?" Clawson repeated, coming closer. "Ride with us, or die?"

It was then Lee stiffened, knowing he had only seconds now, and the choked words had to come out. Words that would be Lee's choice of either life or death.

They came out now, weakly at first, words that sounded strange to Lee. "I don't ride with you, Clawson," they said. Now that he had made his decision, Lee felt a strength pour into him. "You can call the turns any way you like—but that's the way it stands. He worked his fingers at his sides, then, longing for a gun and a fighting chance.

Yes, Lee had written his own ticket, and he saw it now in the sudden tensing of Boot Clawson, heard it in the stepping aside of Danny Hook. Boot Clawson was pulling his gun. There was a metallic click of Danny Hook dogging back a hammer. Lee was edging away—toward the left—

NOW HE suddenly hurled himself with all his might against the stove, upsetting it amidst a melee of falling stovepipes. A blinding pall of soot filled the room, through which Clawson was shooting. The bullet nicked Lee's left earlobe as he ducked low and came up with a stick of stovewood leaving his hand in Clawson's direction. The stick landed somewhere on Clawson, for he let out a yelp, there was the clatter of his dropped gun and the big outlaw himself was staggered backwards against the far wall.

The pall was lifting, but flames
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The Law Wagon



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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

(Continued From Page 91)

tested. When four horse thieves were hanged at Turner's Pass, they confessed that hundreds of road agents and murderers were operating in the Western part of America.

According to these captured thieves, these men were organized for crime, with a constitution and by-laws, and a death penalty was automatically inflicted upon traitors, certain men being detailed to hunt them down.

Many are the tales told of the work of the Vigilantes—too many and too numerous to be detailed here. A typical incident, however, was a Mexican girl who was hanged at Somerville, California, in 1851 for knifing a miner who had playfully kicked in her door while drunk.

Tried and convicted before a miner's court, this girl, Maria Hernandez, was sentenced to death by hanging and given four hours to prepare herself. Dressing in all her finery, she walked calmly to the middle of the Yuba River bridge, which was to be her scaffold, adjusted the noose with her own hands and jumped to her death with a cheery farewell.

The San Francisco Vigilance Committee of 1851 hanged four men and banished a score. Law in that city was little more than a farce until two hundred Vigilantes began to clean it up.

Not only did the Committee of '51 hang and banish undesirables, but in many cases they prevented them from landing. Ship after ship was inspected as soon as they anchored in the bay and men and women of questionable character were forbidden to set foot in California.

From the penal colonies of Australia came many men who had served their terms and who looked upon the American gold fields and frontier towns as places free from the restrictions of law. These, however, were turned back as quickly as they arrived, though some of them managed to land at other ports and so increased the criminal population.

Nevertheless, The Committee ac-

THE WAY OF THE VIGILANTES

complished much and was soon so well satisfied with its labors as to feel there no longer existed need for it.

FIVE YEARS later saw the rise of the most pretentious and powerful organization in Vigilante history. By 1856 the effects of the operations of the Committee of '51 had worn off and the lawless element had again attained the upper hand in the community.

Therefore an organization came into being which was to become famous as the Vigilance Committee of 1856. This committee comprised an executive council of forty-one members and an army of five thousand men, divided into four regiments of infantry and artillery, together with several battalions and companies of men armed with pistols to guard the citizens. There was also a complete medical staff.

Unfortunately for the respectable part of San Francisco's population, many of the worst criminals of the city hastened to squirm into the organization to escape the rope. Some of them even found places on the executive council. At least one-third of the Vigilantes were foreigners, most of whom could not speak or write English. This group immediately set about discrediting influential citizens who were becoming dangerous to its regime and succeeded in banishing many of them.

In spite of this, it must not be assumed that the Vigilantes were a detriment to the community. Whatever faults the Committee may have had were over-balanced by the worth of its work. Two murderers were hanged at Fort Gunnybags, the unique fortress maintained in the heart of the city, and more than two thousand desperadoes were forced to leave the country under pain of similar treatment.

Dissension in the ranks of the Committee arose with the wounding of

(Continued On Page 94)

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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

(Continued From Page 93)

Sterling Hopkins, a desperado member of the Vigilante police, by Judge David S. Terry of the Supreme Court.

The foreign element of the "army" became mutinous, demanding Terry's death, and feeble resistance of the Law and Order Party, led by W. T. Sherman, would have been of little avail in halting the reign of terror and crime had the Vigilantes divided against themselves. Hopkins recovered, however, and harmony returned. So in August of 1856 the Committee was quietly disbanded and passed into history.

The Vigilante organization known as the "601 Committee" spread rapidly throughout Nevada and Utah once it was originated. The Spring of 1871 marked its first appearance in Virginia City, Nevada, where, on the evening of March 24, a body of men quietly took possession of a militia armory, supplied themselves with muskets and bayonets, and stationed a strong guard all around the block in which was located the county jail. This guard of white-hooded, determined men turned back every person who approached.

Meanwhile a score of masked Vigilantes broke into the courthouse, surprised the sheriff and a deputy in their beds and secured the keys to the jail, which they promptly opened. From a cell they took Arthur Heffernan, who had shot and killed in cold blood a man standing at the bar of a saloon. In the excitement and fear the murderer was unable to pull on one of his boots.

"Never mind the boot," he was told. "You won't need it where you're going!"

The hanging proceeded as scheduled without interference. When it was over the firing of a small cannon signaled the Vigilantes to disperse.

On July of the same year George B. Kirk was hanged. This man had served a term in the Nevada State

THE WAY OF THE VIGILANTES

Prison at Carson City after killing a man in California, and being considered an undesirable citizen, had been notified to leave Virginia City. He obeyed the order, but later returned in defiance. He was promptly hanged as an example to other banished desperadoes.

The "601 Committee" continued in existence throughout Utah and Nevada for several years, in both of which states it was a sign of terror to all evildoers, just as was a similiar organization, the "XXX" in Idaho. The last recorded use of the symbol was in 1877, when it was found pinned to the clothes of an unidentified corpse at Winnemucca, Nevada.

Perhaps the Vigilantes of the West never stretched their activities more than the committee at Sonoma, California, which took over a branch bank in 1885, when the main institution in San Francisco failed. The committee proceeded to pay all depositors and all outstanding debts in the town, turning what funds remained over to the sheriff.

Yet, with all their shortcomings and high-minded methods, the Vigilantes did much to make the country inhabitable.

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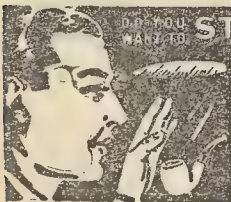
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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

(Continued From Page 78)

ry bought them cattle, the bill of sale is at the bottom of Red Lake."

"I stick by the trade," said Canary.

"Shore," growled Scoggins, "but that don't help none. Skeery borrowed money to buy 'em and give a mortgage. If you pay one I got the other an' no bill of sale to cover it." He scratched his grizzly beard, "To save the bank, Canary, is to jest tear up this one from Skeery, and you gimme the money he paid, then we can extend yore mortgage another year."

"I don't bite," growled Canary. "Go get 'em if you want 'em." He stood studying Scoggins' distressed face. "I might," he proposed, "buy 'em again if you foreclose right and legal, an' make new paper, a thousand down, balance come shipping time next fall."

"How you gonner feed 'em, son. If we make new paper we gotter know that. All your range is burned clean."

Canary smiled, "I jest been talking to old Alfredo Guterrez. He says he got a chance to buy back that Tax title, an I'm givin' him that chance. Red Lake's gonna be mine now, an' there's plenty good gramma waiting on the north range."

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(Continued From Page 90)

from the fallen stove were catching a corner of the room. Lee became dimly aware that the cabin was afire as he dived for the fallen gun. The sudden move saved his life. Danny's bullets were going over his head. Danny was able to see now. The next ones, Lee knew, wouldn't miss.

He had Clawson's Colt in his hand and he twisted around and fired from a prone position. He saw Danny twitch and watched him slowly melt to the floor.

Clawson was lurching back. Lee wrenched around, sprang to his feet, gun level. He must have given the huge man a good wallop, for Clawson was holding his head, and there was blood running from it.

"It's gettin' hot in here," Clawson mumbled.

"It'll get hotter," Lee snapped, "where you're headed. Drag your pal out of here before he burns to death."

Clawson obeyed, a little awkwardly, stopping thirty feet from the burning shack. Lee wagged the gun. "There's a small medicine kit in my saddlebag. Get it, and I'll patch you both up. Hook will live, because I didn't hit a vital spot. No tricks, Clawson. This gun will be where I can grab it, all the time."

Hours later, the three rode over the Picket Pins, the sullen pair ahead with their hands bound to their saddlehorns and their feet to their stirrups, Lee pushing up the rear with gun handy. He could still leave, he told himself. He could make himself long gone from this country. In new parts, he could play a lone hand and the next time he pulled a job he'd be more careful about details. He could rip open the letter, satisfy his curiosity and ride off forgetting a gent named Sam Ainsworth who had sent him on an important errand to Wolf Springs.

He could do all these things, but he wouldn't. Back there in the cabin, facing death, that was when he had made up his mind that old Sam had not gambled wrong on him. Lee Sandlin had gone straight in that moment—and he would stay straight. It would take long years before he could real-

ize his ambition of becoming a doctor now.

They pulled up before the Wolf Springs sheriff's office. A man with a badge on his flapping vest came hurrying from a doorway, blinking sharp eyes at Lee.

"Ab Longmire?" Lee asked, shifting in the saddle.

"Right," snapped the sheriff. "But—"

"Then you got yourself a jailful of polecats," Lee cut in. "Danny Hook, here, busted out of the penitentiary, and it's high time Boot Clawson was slammed into one."

Longmire gasped. "Boot Clawson! Been tryin' to get that slick bank robber for two years! But—who are you?"

"It don't matter who I am," Lee said grimly. "Warden Ainsworth wanted you to get this letter." He brought it from inside his shirt.

Longmire grabbed it, ripped it open and read. He took his time about it, Lee thought, reading it slowly and thoughtfully. Finally he looked up, staring straight at Lee, and he thrust the letter into his hand.

"It's yours to read, Sandlin. Old Sam's a queer one, and he hangs onto it like hell if he's got a hunch about a man. Even if it has the governor and all the other bigwigs down on his head. But he seldom hits it wrong at that."

Wonderingly, then, Lee read. He read it all, twice, but it was the last part that stuck in his mind.

...and so if this letter reaches you with its seal unbroken, you will know that its bearer, Lee Sandlin, has stood the test that I believed he would stand, and I shall recommend his immediate pardon.

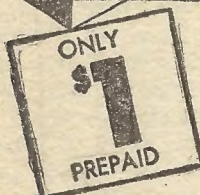
*Sincerely yours,
Samuel Ainsworth
Warden.*

Pardon! Things began to reel before Lee's eyes and his sights got a little blurry. Old Sam, he thought, had shortened the years considerably for him. That distant day when he could call himself Dr. Lee Sandlin loomed up bright and promising now!

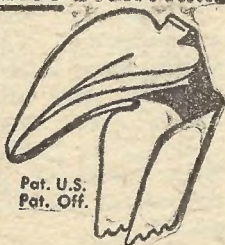
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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

(Continued From Page 73)

was loose, and that was that."

For the rest of it, he had been busy, finding a horse which belonged to a prospector, heading for The Shack, rounding up their own crew, who had not been too drunk to respond to his story. Then they had acted swiftly. They had found the wagon wherein the women were riding, and effected an easy rescue; they knew now that they could prove their innocence to the Mormons, should it be necessary again. And Cynthia and Mandy had insisted on coming along with him to the rescue of Owen.

"And that's about all," the Major sighed. "The boys took care uv such fightin' as there was to do. Which wasn't much. The one crew uv cut-throats had pretty well disposed of the other, who in turn had done the same by them. By the time our boys showed up, sure and there was little opposition to our takin' over again."

The sun was spreading now, lighting the Western slopes, the way ahead. The Major twisted at his mustache and eyed it approvingly.

"As a man who has had some past experience with the joys of matrimony, sure and I find meself lookin' forward to a honeymoon in this pleasant valley," he said. "For a lady, particularly such beautiful ones as we have with us, can't stay long unwed in this country. And Mandy, bless her heart, feels the same way. So we should be able to find us a preacher, Jess, and make it a double wedding, eh? That I've never tried before, but, the ladies willing, I like the sound of it."

"Any sort of a wedding I've never tried before, but, the ladies willing, I like the sound of it too," Owen agreed, and looked at Cynthia.

For her part, Cynthia was looking at Mandy, warm rich color flooding her cheeks. Mandy nodded, and the two of them recited in a gay unison.

"The ladies are willing," they agreed. "We like the sound of it, too."

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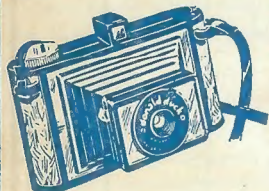
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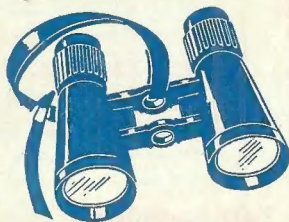
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Takes only a few seconds to attach or remove KEM INSTANT HOT WATER HEATER. No special skill or knowledge required. Easier to operate than the average electric iron!

Fits Any Standard Faucet

KEM INSTANT HOT WATER HEATER fills a long and urgent need in basement, garage, cottage, tourist camp, office and factory—and when home hot water supply fails in kitchen or bath.

Fully Guaranteed

Heater is precision made and guaranteed against any and all defects in material and workmanship. With ordinary care, it gives many years of satisfactory service.

KEM COMPANY, Dept. 73, 18 E. 41st St., New York 17, N. Y.

✓ Check THESE ADVANTAGES

- ✓ NO MOVING PARTS to wear away or get out of order
- ✓ Runs on AC or DC current
- ✓ Constructed of handsome hammered aluminum
- ✓ Measures 2 3/4" x 3 3/4", requiring small storage space when not in use
- ✓ Fits any standard cold water faucet
- ✓ Carries 7-foot extension cord
- ✓ Takes only few seconds to attach or remove
- ✓ Exceedingly low cost operation—only a few cents an hour
- ✓ Fully guaranteed against defects in material or workmanship

NOW ONLY
\$3.98 ★

YOUR MONEY REFUNDED WITHIN 5 DAYS IF KEM HEATER FAILS TO GIVE INSTANT HOT WATER!

Don't be inconvenienced another day by lack of hot water in home, cottage, office or factory. ORDER YOUR KEM HEATER TODAY! SEND NO MONEY. Just fill in and mail coupon and then pay the postman \$3.98 plus postage when your heater is delivered, or send \$3.98 and we will pay postage.

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- ☐ Rush KEM HOT WATER HEATER C.O.D., I'll pay postman \$3.98 plus postage.
- ☐ Enclose \$3.98, send postpaid.

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